

Supervisors call for Del-Norte specific solution

April 16, 2020



Del Norte County Board of Supervisors during their regular meeting via Zoom on Tuesday each weighed in on their top concerns during the coronavirus pandemic.

District 5 Supervisor Bob Berkowitz kicked off his report, summarizing the pandemic.

“We live in amazing times,” he said. “I’ve received dozens of phone calls asking hundreds of questions about COVID-19, such as why are all the restaurants closed? Will I be arrested if I’m caught outside without a facemask? Can I go outside to walk my dog? Just an unbelievable number of questions.”

District 3 Supervisor Chris Howard shared his concern with the closure of state parks around the county. After conversations with local and district rangers, Howard was further concerned these soft closures could lead state parks to permanently gate some of the facilities.

“I have a great deal of concern about this because, the permanent gates, once they go up, I think it sends a pretty poor message to this community,” Howard said. “We’ve pretty much curtailed this movement of transients into our community. Our community needs to be able to use these areas. And what is currently

happening, is we're forcing people to congregate, instead of disperse, in a lot of the trailheads in the state park."

Howard requested the board place a game plan on its next agenda to work with state parks that would allow some local control over access to the outdoor areas. He argued Del Norte's constituents need access to state parks to recreate, to get out and not feel isolated in areas less impacted as bigger, urban areas.

"It's definitely not a one-size-fits-all state," Howard said.

District 1 Supervisor Roger Gitlin chose to start his report with an update on the effects of the pandemic at Pelican Bay State Prison.

Gitlin said as of Tuesday, no staff or inmates have been infected with the coronavirus.

PBSP has switched its product protocol through its Prisons Industries Authority, to now make hand sanitizer and about 800-1,000 medical masks per day to distribute locally and throughout PIA's jurisdiction.

"To do this, they are mitigating any factors of anyone getting the coronavirus by taking incredible precautions to make sure their work areas remain COVID-19 free," Gitlin said.

Pelican Bay also welcomed 18 new correctional officers who have all been screened for the coronavirus, Gitlin said, adding inmates who have recently arrived at Pelican Bay are being quarantined for at least 14 days. Also, on-site visitation was suspended, but inmates were given additional phone access. Finally, everyone who enters PBSP must be medically screened and have their body temperatures taken.

"I would like to take this opportunity to commend Warden James Robertson and his staff for exemplary work in keeping Pelican Bay State Prison COVID-19 free," Gitlin said.

By comparison, Gitlin said across California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's 35-institution system, as of April 13, there were 55 inmates out of 130,000 incarcerated across the state and 75 staff that have tested positive for the coronavirus.

Next, Gitlin expressed his pleasure in hearing the state of California announce Monday evening that it was going to relax some shelter at home restrictions in association with Oregon and Washington.

"However, the discussions to loosen some of their guidelines and restrictions must take place immediately. Not unlike the other 57 counties in California, the state itself and the country, our economy is evaporating," Gitlin said.

Though he doesn't underscore the seriousness of the coronavirus, Gitlin worried that the continued self-imposed embargo is unsustainable and that the mitigation is approaching the point of being worse for the country than the virus itself.

Gitlin argued the country has survived pandemics before — 57 million caught the Swine Flu in 2009-10 resulting in 12,000 deaths. The H1N1 virus hospitalized nearly 1 million people in 2017-18 and killed 61,000. Gitlin pointed out neither time was the country shut down due to the outbreak.

“Continued stay at home directives are causing a great deal of pain and pressure on our community, and we will soon experience the unintended consequences of this long-term, restrictive behavior,” Gitlin said.

“It is unrealistic to expect many businesses to return to normal, whatever that word means, or even reopen at all,” he continued. “It’s unlikely that the taxpayer-funded relief packages we are all awaiting, which will inflate our already skyrocketing national debt, those dollars will come from above Del Norte County, will certainly not be sufficient to bring our community back to vibrancy for the long-term picture.”

Gitlin said the next few weeks will be critical for the long- and short-term survival of Del Norte County, not from the impacts of the coronavirus, “but the real harm may come from the government itself as it continues to hold firm on the current course.”

“Indeed, difficult decisions must be made in short order. I hope you will all join me in wishing wisdom and deliverance to our local, state and nationally elected officials,” Gitlin concluded.

District 2 Supervisor Lori Cowan centered her comments on efforts to remember services for the homeless during the pandemic.

Cowan said she’s had conversations with Dana Gill Port at Methodist Church who has overseen a program to allow the homeless to take showers at the church. With the churches closed, Cowan said she’s been trying to work with the county and the city to utilize the showers in Fred Endert Municipal Pool.

“Unfortunately, that did not work out,” she said, due to the city electing to keep it closed due to the pandemic. “So, the county has chosen to go a different direction. We’ll be using hotels to do showers so the homeless can continue to use showers during the pandemic.”

Cowan then said she, too, has received many, many calls daily regarding procedures with the shelter in place, around vacation rentals, usage of the river and the beaches and masks.

“We are different. Following the recommendation of the state doesn’t seem wise or doesn’t seem to work for us. I think we should have that conversation about what works for our community,” Cowan said. “I’ve been working with a constituent who has been making masks for DHHS, social workers and homeless people and those helping the homeless in the community.”

Cowan said it is a difficult and different time for everyone, and she chooses to find the positives in the situation.

“To hear what Supervisor Gitlin said about the large numbers of people who perished in the other pandemics and hear about the small amount now, comparatively, it shows what we are doing is working. That’s what makes me okay with what we are doing,” Cowan said. “I’m trying to look at all the positive things that have come out of this. We need to do what we need to do to take care of the health and safety of our community. That’s a little inconvenient to some. But I hope everybody looks at all the positives. You hear a lot about nature coming back. And boy did I see that yesterday with the Aleutian geese out there. I’ve never seen so many out there in our community or the last few years.”

Chairman Gerry Hemmingsen agreed a Del Norte-specific solution needed to be developed.

“We do need to have some different considerations, with more local input, rather than looking at this is a one size fits all issue with COVID-19,” Hemmingsen said. “Knock on wood, we don’t get any more cases and things have peaked. We want to prepare for the worst and hope for the best.”