

Local leaders provide updates during COVID-19 pandemic

March 27, 2020



Leaders from all levels of local government on Monday, March 23, participated in a video presentation on Youtube to update the community on efforts being taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Del Norte County Board of Supervisors Chair Gerry Hemmingsen kicked off the presentation, assuring viewers that the government at both the state and federal levels are doing everything they can to ensure both the economy and the people will be taken care of during the crisis.

“We need to do our part. We need to continue social distancing, washing your hands, self-quarantine, all the things you can do to help the cause,” Hemmingsen said. “Please be a part of the solution. This is a very serious pandemic, and we all need to do our part to make this as minimal as we can.”

‘Everybody should assume they’re sick’

Dr. Warren Rehwaldt, Del Norte County Public Health Officer, said the take-home message is the need to slow this virus down to an absolute crawl.

“We have no reason to believe it will not arrive. We don’t have proof that it’s here, it may already be creeping into the community as I speak. We are aware of cases in the surrounding counties that have shown up in the last week. So, we have to presume it will get here if it’s not here already,” Rehwaldt said.

“So, people have to be mindful of that, to take these precautions seriously, do everything they can to distance themselves, stay home when they are sick. If you’re elderly or at risk, otherwise stay home when you’re well away from people who carry a virus you could get.”

Rehwaldt explained Gov. Gavin Newsom’s shelter in place order creates the safest environment through public health measures, adding this community mitigation strategy is very important for people to abide by because it’s the best defense against the virus right now.

“Everybody should assume they’re sick and everyone else around them is sick and behave that way because that’s the best way to prevent transmission,” Rehwaldt said. “We are very hopeful by doing this and continuing to do it, we’ll create the environment that when the virus arrives, it will not spread very easily. If it does spread, it will spread very slowly, in a way we can manage.”

Going forward, Rehwaldt said the health department will be changing its testing strategy for the virus, prioritizing tests for those who need it most. For now, most people don’t need a test.

“The young folks who get this are going to mostly do very well, it will feel like a cold or a flu. And when they’ve recovered, life goes on,” Rehwaldt said. “We may be able to test them after the fact to prove they had the virus. We’d like to do that because we’d like to find out how much of an immunity we’re building up in the community over time.”

He added the health department might change that message in a few weeks when it has better testing.

Rehwaldt pointed to some potentially good news as evidence is starting to grow that people are trying drugs elsewhere in the world that might have a good effect.

“I suspect by the end of this week, or the end of next week, we’ll have some proof, one way or another. And I think that’s an encouraging thought,” Rehwaldt said. \

County creates Economic Resiliency Branch

Del Norte County Administrative Officer Jay Sarina said the

County Office of Emergency Services (COES) is currently activated at Level 2. He explained this means certain sections of COES are actively planning and preparing for projected issues that may come up and also issues currently being faced Del Norte County.

Sarina said to help the community during all the shutdowns, an Economic Resiliency Branch (ERB) has been created, which will be up and running with its website soon. The ERB will facilitate many partners who can direct local businesses and individuals to assets and assistance that may be available to help them almost immediately.

“There is also the hope state and federal assistance will be handled by COES,” Sarina said.

To help the county’s most vulnerable population, Sarina said COES is dealing with the distribution of food to local food pantries and food bank services, working with several non-governmental organizations and non-

profits.

Sarina said the COES is receiving requests for protective equipment for first responders from local agencies and partners

“We have received two of those from the state of California and expect a third. While we’re not getting everything we’ve requested, we are getting equipment,” Sarina said.

To provide up to date information and dispel misinformation on the web and social media, Sarina recommends everyone direct their questions related to COVID-19 to the Del Norte County Health and Human Services Public Health website www.co.del-norte.ca.us/departments/health-human-services/public-health. It has public service announcements, information almost up to the minute of the number of tests administered in Del Norte County, how many are negative and how many are still pending.

“I would like to thank those in our community who have stepped up in this challenging time, following directions for social distancing, practicing good hygiene and limiting time in public areas,” Sarina said. “It’s up to all of us to do our part and be a part of the solution and keep ourselves and our families safe. Look in on elderly neighbors, make sure they are adequately stocked with whatever their needs are, be it medicines or food.”

City’s water works open, playgrounds closed

Crescent City Manager Eric Wier explained one of the city’s top priorities after keeping first responders and the community safe is keeping its water and sewer systems fully operational.

To keep a healthy eye on it at all times, Wier said Crescent City has split its Public Works crew into two teams — A and B.

“So if there is some sort of sickness comes through, we will have another team that will be able to respond to make sure the community has a water system that is fully capable of not only providing the normal needs but also so everyone can remain sanitary in all their conditions,” Wier said.

He also reminded everyone that while it’s good to use sanitary wipes on common surfaces, please don’t throw them away by flushing them down the toilet.

“They don’t work well when they get in sewer pipes and can cause clogs, which we then have to respond to and creates another environmental situation with a sewer spill,” Wier said.

To comply with the social distancing mandate, the city has closed its playgrounds.

“Playgrounds are an area that people congregate. It’s really hard to have social distancing when you’re using those,” Wier said.

Parks will remain open, and Wier encourages everyone to still use them, but while still practicing social distancing. As such, public restrooms will remain open but will be cleaned out twice a day, by separate daytime and nighttime cleaning crews.

Also, city offices have been closed to the public to protect employees as well as the general public from using common area countertops, Wier said.

Operations are still ongoing, however. Go to the city's website, find the appropriate number and call. Wier said you can still use email to send documents like building permits. Water and sewer bills can be paid by phone, or by signing up for online bill pay, or even dropping the payment off at the office through the mail drop box, Wier said.

Wier added through the Economic Resiliency Branch, business owners can get the basic information they need by emailing bizhelp-subscribe@lists.crescentcity.org to sign up for regular updates to whatever is going on.

"The more than 900 businesses in our community will also be contacted this week, by the Chamber of Commerce, the city or county," Wier said. "During this phone call, we'll be looking for information as to what the economic injury is to that particular business. This will then help us understand what this disaster truly is and we can get that information to the state. It will also help us better understand layoffs that are occurring, and any information that the business owner or employee needs as they're going through this time."

School district finalizing plans for learning from home

Del Norte Unified School District Superintendent Jeff Harris proudly pointed to what the district has done so far during the shutdown, and plans in the works for what is next.

"In the last six days, the nutrition services and transportation departments have banded together with volunteers from staff, teachers and classified employees and from the community. They have delivered more than 19,300 meals to youth between ages birth to 18 in our community. Staff has also put together over 15,000 pages of work for our students," Harris said. "We are committed to moving forward that helps our students learn, supports our families and also as we come out the other side of this, that we can look and be proud of the progress we've made."

To accommodate what is next, Harris said staff is learning more about distance learning — both online professional development and online learning communities. Next week, he said students will see packets of work plus a blended online vs. paper-pencil work.

In two weeks, the staff hopes to have together a plan for disseminating Chromebooks, to get computers out to families so students can access online learning platforms.

"We should have fully online learning plans available within two to three weeks. And then you and your children will have an opportunity of taking a hard copy, a blended copy or a fully-online program," Harris said. "We're also looking into how to continue special education support."

While the children are out, maintenance and custodial staff have been deep cleaning and sanitizing classrooms, Harris said.

Although schools are closed to students, the district has been required to open child care centers for first responders, health care workers and essential services employees who have to report to their worksites, Harris said.

“Hopefully will have by the end of the week a registration form and kick that off Monday, March 30,” Harris said.

Also, the school district has started a series of webinars where teachers, staff and administrators can share information, be it what’s going on educationally or COVID-19 in the community.

“We want to help facilitate those kinds of learning opportunities for everyone in our community to negate the rumor mill and promote a really thoughtful process and understanding of where we are,” Harris said. “We’ll also be having a Q&A session at least once a week, so you can engage with us through media and we can answer questions people have.”

After talking with the state superintendent of schools and other county superintendents, Harris said as of right now, they are not looking at extending the school year.

“If you were looking toward going into college or the military, you don’t have to worry about that. We are looking at potentially waiving some graduation credits,” he added.

Social distancing through education, not law enforcement

Del Norte County Sheriff Erik Apperson said one of the most frequent questions he receives is how is he going to stop people from congregating?

“Our approach now is through education and collaboration,” Apperson said. “Humboldt County is exploring an interesting model. We’re going to encourage people to do the right thing. It needs to be noted, that generally, people are doing the right thing. Some people are taking some hard hits to be compliant.”

Apperson said the sheriff’s office has also received complaints about out of area visitors showing up at local beaches, like a vacation, as opposed to staying at home and sheltering in place.

“I need people to understand at this point, there isn’t an enforcement mechanism to prevent people from visiting our community,” Apperson said. “We are exploring possibilities to mitigate that to make the community safer. But right now, we need to continue to educate, to continue to help each other out, continue to contact law enforcement. Just because you call us, doesn’t mean we have to make an arrest or cite somebody. We are you, you are us, and we are all in this together.”

Apperson listed the steps his office has taken during the pandemic:

- Provided personal protection equipment to all staff and most volunteers.
- Screening staff with several specific health-related questions before their shifts.

- Isolated communications team, as they provide an integral service to public safety and answer 911 and non-emergency calls.

“Dispatchers are asking screening questions related to the pandemic. I want to be clear, we are still responding. I’ve gotten some feedback on that,” Apperson said. “We’re simply asking those questions so we can prepare our first responders for that response. If you call, we’re going to be there.”

- Taken extra steps to sanitize the lobby, which remains open 24/7.

- Have limited inmate movement within the correctional facility and suspended non-essential services. Apperson said the current jail population is well below capacity, so there is room to house additional prisoners if need be.

- Sterilized entire pod within the jail that functions on a separate air system and is a negative pressure tank. It is being kept unoccupied if it’s needed to be utilized.

- Remained in regular contact with Pelican Bay State Prison in regards to concerns for prisoners and staffing to meet the needs of those prisoners.

- Stocked up on necessary equipment the sheriff’s office needs to do its jobs if supplies are slowed down in the future.

Apperson wanted to reiterate the importance of social distancing.

“People tend to drive better when law enforcement is behind them. I think we need to take the same approach to try to slow the spread of this virus down. When we interact with people, we need to assume they are sick also. We need to limit that interaction,” he said.

Crescent City Police Chief Richard Griffin briefly echoed Apperson’s message, saying his office has taken the same precautionary measures as the sheriff’s office. Calls are still being taken, including for retrieving property, which can be scheduled.

“I just request we take some common sense and a little bit of time, we can make a difference if we do our part in this. Basically, relax, spend some time with your family, catch up on some yard work, so we can make this virus slow down,” Griffin said.

‘We are committed to you as leaders’

Mayor Bake Inscore wrapped up the presentation pointing to the county’s website again www.co.del-norte.ca.us/departments/health-human-services/public-health or the state’s <https://covid19.co.gov> for the latest information.

Inscore said the most important thing to remember is we are working in this together.

“We are committed as leaders to provide you with timely updates, give you the very best information, and encourage you to keep up the good work. This community has done a phenomenal job adhering to the

requests that have been made,” Inscore said. “You can email me directly at binscore@crescentcity.org. I’ll answer as best I can, but will most likely forward your question to the appropriate person who will give you the best answer.

“We’re here for you and as a community, we’ll be able to work through this process together. My encouragement to you is to stay healthy, stay safe, make good decisions, help your neighbors. The best help you can be is to stay home when you can.”