

COVID-19 TASKFORCE UPDATE –

This update will provide current COVID-19 case information, Governor Baker's decision to extend the Stay at Home Order and to order the use of face coverings in public settings; a report on the first meeting of the Financial Task Force; and an update regarding Annual Town Meeting and Town election.

As of 4:00 pm today there are 69,087 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Commonwealth (+12,625); 4,103 confirmed cases in Bristol County (+1,035), and 40 confirmed cases in Rehoboth. Unfortunately, there have been 4,090 fatalities across the Commonwealth attributed to the virus (+1,087).

The Baker-Polito Administration has extended the essential services emergency order to May 18th. The order requires all businesses and organizations that do not provide "COVID-19 Essential Services" keep their physical workplaces and facilities to workers, customers and the public closed until May 18th.

The Administration also announced that the Department of Public Health's Stay At Home Advisory remains in effect. Residents are strongly urged to stay home and avoid unnecessary travel and other unnecessary person to person contact during this time period. Residents who are considered at high risk when exposed to COVID-19 should limit social interactions with other people as much as possible. Finally, gatherings of 10 or more people remain prohibited until May 18th.

On Friday, May 1st the Governor signed an Executive Order requiring all residents over the age of two to use a face covering or mask in public places where maintaining proper social distancing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are not possible. The statewide order goes into effect on Wednesday, May 6th. This order applies to all workers and customers of businesses and other organizations that are currently open to the public and permitted to operate as COVID-19 Essential Businesses, such as grocery stores, pharmacies, and other retail stores. Residents are also required to wear a mask or face covering at all times when using any means of transportation service or public mass transit.

A face covering may include anything that covers the nose and mouth, including a mask, scarf, or bandana. Health care masks (such as surgical or N-95 masks)

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should not be used and should be preserved for health care workers and first responders. Cloth masks should not be worn by young children under the age of two, persons with difficulty breathing, or those who are unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.

The order is to be enforced by state and local police departments and by local health agents. Those who fail to comply with the Governor's order may be subject to a fine of up to \$300. Earlier today I spoke with Chief of Police James Trombetta and Health Agent Karl Drowne. We all agree most residents will comply out of a sense of contributing to the common good and enforcement action should take the form of education whenever possible. However, make no mistake we will take the necessary action to enforce the order and protect our residents, if required. Questions related to the face covering order or compliance issues should be reported to the Health Agent Karl Drowne at 508-252-3099 Ext. 3101, or the Health Department Office Manager Amy Brown (508) 252-3099 Ext. 3100 .

Senior Citizens or residents with compromised immune systems who are in need of a reusable face covering should contact the Selectmen's Office @ 508-252-3758, call the COVID-19 Helpline @ 774-565-8111, or email gschwall@rehobothma.gov.

Last week I announced the formation of the Financial Task Force to create a snapshot of the Town's current financial position, to forecast out the remainder of FY 20 and to establish recommendations for the Board of Selectmen to consider in preparation for FY21. Since then we have met and I am pleased to report there was good dialogue and I'm confident the group will move towards making solid recommendations to the Selectmen and ultimately Town Meeting. I want to thank Debbie Arruda, Mike Deignan, Cheryl Gouveia and Roberta Oliveria for being part of this workgroup.

The Commonwealth estimates a shortfall of \$5.0 billion in funding the proposed FY21 budget. Across the board reductions in discretionary budget lines will be required to bridge the gap. How much will be determined by the amount of aid the federal government is prepared to allocate to the states, and how much the

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legislature and the governor are prepared to allocate from the rainy day fund, which contains \$3.5 billion.

Given the continued uncertainty and the difficult decisions that need to be made, the Commonwealth's budget is not expected to be finalized before the start of FY21. This makes it impossible for municipalities to finalize their budgets anytime soon; certainly not before the Commonwealth makes decisions related to Chapter 70 funding and local aid.

The current situation makes it impossible for us to conduct Town Meetings in June as we had initially thought possible, and there is too much uncertainty to accurately predict when we can schedule Town Meeting. There is legislation pending this week to provide additional guidance for conducting Annual Town Meetings and the Financial Task Force is participating in a conference call with the Department of Local Services to discuss budgeting and appropriations to continue town and school services until Annual Town Meeting can be conducted safely. Next week I will ask the Board to postpone Annual Town Meeting to an unspecified date in the future. The date we ultimately select will be determined after the pending legislation is debated, approved, and reviewed to see what options most accurately address the issues we face in Rehoboth.

The Town Election will be held on Tuesday, June 30, 2020. The Town Clerk and her colleagues across the Commonwealth are consulting with the State Elections Division and Town Counsels to determine exactly what an election in the middle of a pandemic looks like, but we can rest assured it will be different than anything we have seen before. Although the details still need to be worked through, it is safe to assume the number of in-person polling locations will be reduced, along with the hours the polling places will be open for in-person voting. In recognition of the challenges presented by conducting an election under the present conditions, the Legislature has approved "early voting by mail" as a way for the democratic process to continue while protecting both the voter and the election workers.

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Any person may obtain an early voting ballot by sending a signed request to the Town Clerk's office or by filling out and returning the early voting application available on the town website, or by calling the Town Clerk's office. All applications for early voting ballots must be received before noon on Monday, June 29, 2020, the last business day before the election. The completed early voting ballot must be received by the Town Clerk before the polls close on Election Day. All early voting ballots will be secured in the town vault and processed on Election Day. This is a great way to exercise your constitutional right to vote and do it from the safety and comfort of your home. It is also a great way to avoid the inconvenience and potential aggravation caused by the necessary changes to the in-person voting process. I encourage everyone to avail themselves of the early voting by mail option.

I know the weather is getting nicer and everyone is getting itchy to get back to the way things were. I get it, and do I. And no, I don't like wearing a mask – I find them uncomfortable and unnatural. But, I do it. I do it because I care about my neighbors, my friends, and my family. I do it because it is the right thing to do, even if it's not easy, or comfortable.

I also miss hugging my daughter. I really miss it, but as unnatural as it is I understand the best way to show your love right now is to practice social distancing. It stinks. But now is the time to double down. The only way to fix the economy and get our lives back on track is to beat the virus. And the only way to beat the virus is to stop allowing it to transfer from person to person. And the only way to stop the transfer is to practice social distancing and wear face coverings. So don't be selfish. Do the right thing and follow the guidance provided by the health experts.

Next Sunday is Mother's Day. Mothers have the toughest job in the entire world, and this year a lot of the traditional ways we express our love and admiration for the great job mothers do will not happen. It stinks, but we can find new and creative ways to let mom know how much you love her. The greatest gift we can share with our Mom is keeping her safe. We wish all Mom's in Rehoboth and

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beyond a Happy Mother's Day and extend our wish for your Health and Happiness.