

COVID-19 TASKFORCE UPDATE – May 11, 2020

The following was prepared by Selectman Schwall and read at the beginning of the Board of Selectmen Meeting on May 11, 2020.

This update provides current COVID-19 case information, a comparison of Rehoboth to other communities in Bristol County and across the Commonwealth, a reminder related to real estate taxes and excise tax, and information regarding the US Census, annual town election, and town meeting.

As of 4:00 pm today there are 78,462 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Commonwealth compared to 69,087 last Monday; 4,999 confirmed cases in Bristol County compared to 4,103 last week, and 44 confirmed cases in Rehoboth up from 40 cases reported last Monday. There have been 5,108 fatalities across the Commonwealth attributed to the virus an increase of 1,018 in the past week.

As many of you are aware, the Commonwealth now provides weekly data (posted on Wednesday) reflecting the “count and rate” of clinically confirmed COVID-19 cases for each city and town in Massachusetts. The “count” is the raw number of cases. The “rate” allows for comparison by factoring in varying population levels. In this case, the rate reported by the Commonwealth is based on per 100,000 in population.

There are four cities and sixteen towns in Bristol County. The latest report (posted on May 6th) shows Rayham with the highest incidence of COVID-19 cases with 1,346 cases per 100,000 in population. Of the 20 cities and towns that comprise Bristol County, Rehoboth has the lowest rate of infection with 317 cases per 100,000 in population. The average rate of COVID-19 cases for the other cities and towns in Bristol County is 1,224 per 100,000. For comparison, the reported rate for the Commonwealth is 1,034 clinical confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 in population. Of the 351 cities and towns across the Commonwealth only 26 reported a rate lower than Rehoboth and most of those were small communities in the western part of the state.

I am sharing these numbers for one reason. I want to draw attention to the fact that the decisions we made and the actions we have taken as a community has made us safer. This is not a “Mission Accomplished” statement; rather it is a call to action to keep doing what we are doing to ensure we remain safe. Our lower infection rate is not occurring by accident. It’s because the vast majority of our neighbors are following the guidelines. We are practicing social distancing, we’re limiting our circle of contacts, we cover our face in stores and outside when a 6-foot distance may not be possible, and we are washing our hands. Our collective actions have proven the public health guidance to be correct.

It is important to remember the Commonwealth is still under a Stay at Home Order. However, with the weather getting warmer and some of the restrictions starting to loosen there may be a temptation to start moving away from some of the behaviors that kept us safe. This is an

COVID-19 TASKFORCE UPDATE – May 11, 2020

insidious disease. Many who have the Coronavirus present no symptoms, yet these same people can infect others. As we start to reopen businesses it must be remembered the COVID-19 virus is still with us and new cases are and will be confirmed daily. I urge everyone to listen to the guidance provided by the public health officials, follow the rules around the planned reopening of economy, and take it slow.

In early April, and after consultation with the Town Tax Collector and Treasurer, the Board of Selectmen voted to extend the real estate tax payment deadline from May 1, 2020 to June 1, 2020. The intent of the legislation signed by the Governor and the vote of this Board was to provide relief to taxpayers whose livelihood may have been adversely impacted resulting from COVID-19. We thank everyone who has already paid their taxes and to those who continue to send them in advance of the June 1 due date. There is one situation; however, that needs to be brought to your attention. The majority of homeowners with a mortgage are required to escrow real estate taxes in advance so the money is available when the taxes are due. On or before the due date the money is forwarded to the town by the financial institution and the real estate tax record is updated to reflect payment. Many lending institutions use loan servicing firms to handle the processing of loans and payments of taxes. One such firm is Core Logic. Core Logic is holding more than \$2.0 million dollars, which has been prepaid by Rehoboth taxpayers with the understanding the funds would be sent on or before May 1st. Every other lender sent the escrowed funds to us by May 1st; however, Core Logic did not. They informed the Tax Collector the escrowed funds will not be sent until May 27th at the earliest. To make matters worse, the company refuses to discuss or send any written communication to the Board of Selectmen as to the reason behind withholding our taxpayer's escrowed funds. The one obvious reason in withholding the \$2.0+ million is to earn additional interest on the money they are withholding. I'm sharing this information tonight because we have received a few inquiries from homeowners who are questioning why their tax record does not show the taxes are paid. If you are one of the homeowners who has a mortgage serviced by Core Logic, the tax record card cannot be updated until the payment is received. Once Core Logic sends the payment to the Tax Collector's Office the records will be updated to reflect payment. Rest assured, no Rehoboth taxpayer will be penalized in any way because of this situation. This matter will be resolved. I will end this section where I began. The intent of the legislation was to lend a hand to individual residents. As a result of Core Logic's actions, I have formally requested Secretary Michael Heffernan and the Executive Office for Administration and Finance of Secretary to look into Core Logic's actions.

Another local option afforded in the Act signed by the Governor was for the Board to waive interest and other penalty for late payment of excise tax. Again, after consultation with the Town Tax Collector and Treasurer, the Board of Selectmen voted to waive interest and penalty for late payment of excise tax made after its respective due date but before June 30, 2020.

COVID-19 TASKFORCE UPDATE – May 11, 2020

It is important to note the Act allows the waiver of interest and penalties regarding late payments of bills with a due date of March 10, 2020 or after, when such bills are paid late but paid **before** June 30, 2020. This section of the Act does not permit waiver of interest and penalties regarding bills with due dates before March 10, 2020 or if the bill is not paid before June 30, 2020. All payments must be received by the Tax Collector no later than June 29, 2020 so the record can be updated and the funds accounted by June 30, 2020.

The Town Election will be held on Tuesday, June 30, 2020. The details still need to be worked through, but it is safe to say this Election will look very different than previous elections. 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.

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. 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. Once returned, 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. Please do not wait until the last minute to request or return a ballot. I encourage everyone to avail themselves of the early voting by mail option today.

As mentioned in last week’s update, the Commonwealth estimates a shortfall of \$5.0 billion in funding the proposed FY21 budget. We have been told to expect across the board reductions in discretionary budget lines. It is obvious at least some of these reductions will have a detrimental impact on Rehoboth. The extent of the cuts will undoubtedly be determined by the level of Federal aid, and how much the legislature and the governor are prepared to allocate from the rainy day fund to cover the shortfall.

Given the enormity of the financial crisis, the Commonwealth’s budget will not be finalized before the start of FY21 on July 1st. In speaking with our colleagues in the House and Senate we can expect to receive guidance on local aid in the form of a Resolution. This is critical since we will be unable to put together any town budgeting plan until we have information regarding local aid and Chapter 70 funding.

The Massachusetts Senate worked on the fourth Act to Address Challenges Faced by Municipalities and State Authorities Resulting from COVID-19 last week. The legislation moves

COVID-19 TASKFORCE UPDATE – May 11, 2020

into the House this week. We have provided feedback on this legislation and it is expected the Governor will have the final work product by the end of the week.

The current situation makes it impossible for us to conduct a Town Meeting as presently scheduled. Next week I will ask the Board to officially reschedule the Annual Town Meeting. We are waiting to reschedule until we see what options are included in the pending legislation. However, it is safe to say the Town Meeting scheduled for June will not occur.

We all have a lot to think about these days and completing the US Census may not be high on the priority list for some. Why is the census important? The federal census is conducted once every ten years and directs where federal funds go every year for things like public safety, education, and infrastructure. Being counted today will ensure we receive funds to support our schools, police officers, firefighters, and families in each of the next ten years. To date 58.6% of all Americans have responded to the Census; 60.7% in the Commonwealth, and 72.9% here in Rehoboth. Thank you to everyone who has already responded and to those who still need to be counted you can complete the census online, by phone, or by mail. Please visit 2020Census.gov and be counted.

Before closing I want to take a moment to recognize all of the nurses, but especially those who live in Rehoboth. Tuesday, May 12th is International Nurses Day and culminates a week of celebrating and recognizing the contributions nurses make to society. Perhaps at no other time in history are those contributions on display for all to see. We send our thanks and appreciation to all the nurses in Rehoboth and beyond on this very special day. Thank you for all you do for so many.

This concludes this week's update. Please stay safe. Please stay well.