

COVID-19 TASKFORCE UPDATE – May 18, 2020

The following was prepared by Selectman Schwall and read at the beginning of the Board of Selectmen Meeting on May 18, 2020.

Today we will provide an update on the current COVID-19 case information, the Governor's Reopening Massachusetts plan, and the annual town election.

As of 4:00 PM today there are 87,052 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Commonwealth compared to 78,462 last Monday; 5,996 confirmed cases in Bristol County compared to 4,999 last week, and 48 confirmed cases in Rehoboth up from 44 cases reported last Monday. There have been 5,862 fatalities across the Commonwealth attributed to the virus compared to 5,108 last week. I am pleased to report Rehoboth continues to report the lowest rate of infection of the twenty cities and municipalities in Bristol County with a rate of 348 cases per 100,000 in population.

Our lower infection rate is not occurring by accident. It's because we took decisive action to protect our residents and town employees, and we, as a Community, have followed the public health guidance about covering our nose and mouth, washing our hands and cleaning surfaces, practicing social distance and we remain vigilant about symptoms and stay home if we feel sick. These behaviors kept us safe and led to a flattening of curve across the Commonwealth. These same behaviors will keep us safe as we begin the process of reopening our economy. It is important to remember the Coronavirus continues to present a significant threat; making it all the more important to remain vigilant and continue to practice the public health guidance.

Earlier today Governor Baker announced a plan for reopening Massachusetts. In this update I will provide a high level overview of the reopening plan. On Tuesday we will post links to the Commonwealth's source documents on the Coronavirus page of the Town website. The linked documents contain detailed information.

The reopening plan includes four phases with each phase projected to last a minimum of three weeks. For each business type there is general business guidance for maintaining a safe workspace and sector specific requirements.

Phase One begins today. During Phase One (aka Start) essential businesses and services will continue to operate along with the phased reopening of non-essential businesses; however, essential business and services are required to comply with enhanced safety standards. The manufacturing and construction sectors were given the green light to resume operations effective today so long as they too comply with the general business guidance and their sector specific requirements. Another group of businesses included in Phase One will be able to reopen on Monday, May 25th. Some examples of businesses that can reopen on May 25th include preventative and elective dental and medical visits, hair salons, barber shops, pet grooming, libraries (curbside), retail (curbside), and some outdoor activities like boating,

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fishing, hunting, and zip-lines. Again, all of these businesses will be required to adhere to strict requirements.

Houses of worship are able to reopen effective today with guidelines. Outdoor services are encouraged.

During Phase One “gathering” guidelines remain groups of less than ten people, and the Stay at Home Advisory has been replaced with a Safer at Home Advisory. Employers are encouraged to continue allowing remote workers whenever and wherever possible. And those 65 and over, and those with underlying conditions, should remain at home except for limited trips for essential services.

The Governor was very clear in stating all aspects of the planned reopening will be driven by public health data. A reversal in positive trends will delay moving onto the next phase, or could require the plan to take a step backward until the trending indicates it is safe to proceed.

If all goes well, Phase Two could start in about three weeks. Phase Two (aka Cautious) allows for expanding dining options within restaurants, reopening of nail salons, and a lessening of restrictions around retail and auto dealers. Recreational day camps are also included in Phase Two. Again, every business will need to comply with sector specific requirements for enhanced safety requirements.

Phase Three (aka Vigilant) will see bars, gyms, movie theatres, museums, small performance venues, and residential summer camps reopen.

Phase Four (aka New Normal) will allow for the full resumption of travel, business and worship activities; with certain guidelines and restrictions.

Just as we have all played a role over the past 10-weeks in keeping Rehoboth safe we all have a role to play in successfully reopening the economy. We must remember 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 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.

The Town Election will be held on Tuesday, June 30, 2020. We appreciate those who have taken the initiative to request an Early Voting by Mail Ballot. Voting by mail is the safest and most convenient way to exercise the democratic process in these uncertain times. It is also a great way to avoid the inconvenience and potential aggravation caused by the necessary changes to the in-person voting process.

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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. All early voting ballots will be secured in the town vault and processed on Election Day. Please do not wait until the last minute to request a ballot. I encourage everyone to avail themselves of the early voting by mail option today.

I would also like to encourage anyone who has an interest in becoming an election worker to complete a Talent Bank Form (available on the town website) or reach out to the Town Clerk to learn more. These are challenging times. The legislature is currently reviewing the current election law in advance of the September primary and November general election. In light of the current pandemic, changes will be made to the existing election law and more help may be needed at the polls. Please consider becoming an Election Worker today.

Before closing I want to take a moment to recognize all the Emergency Medical Technicians in Rehoboth and beyond. May 17-23, 2020, is the 46th annual National EMS Week. In 1974, President Gerald Ford authorized EMS Week to celebrate EMS practitioners and the important work they do in communities across the United States.

EMS Week shines a light on the EMS personnel to honor the dedication of those who provide the day-to-day lifesaving services of medicine's "front line." We send our thanks and appreciation to all emergency medical personnel in Rehoboth and beyond during this week of recognition and encourage everyone listening to reach out and thank those who do so much for so many.

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