

BARS/RESTAURANTS – from Page 1

- iii. Hookah bars, cigar bars, and vaping lounges offering their products for on-premises consumption;
- iv. Theaters, museums, and other performance venues;
- v. Gymnasiums, fitness centers, recreation centers, indoor sports facilities, exercise facilities, exercise studios, and spas;
- vi. Amusement parks, arcades, bingo halls, bowling alleys, indoor climbing facilities, skating rinks, trampoline parks, and other similar recreational or entertainment facilities;
- vii. Facilities of country clubs, golf clubs, boating or yacht clubs, sports or athletic clubs, and dining clubs.

First COVID-19 case in Stearns County announced on Thursday

Thursday, March 12: The Minnesota Department of Health confirmed a presumptive positive COVID-19 case in Stearns County, a person in their 60s. The individual returned from a Caribbean cruise on Friday, March 6. On Saturday, March 7, they felt sick, stayed home from work, and sought medical care for their symptoms, testing positive for COVID-19.

This person is home and doing well. One other person has been exposed, a household contact. That person is showing no symptoms and chose to self-quarantine at home as well.

At a press conference on Thursday, March 12, health officials affirmed that this is something they've been expecting, planning for, and are now ready to respond to as needed.

In preparation for events such as the COVID-19 outbreak, public health uses four levels of response. The first – containment – focuses on isolation, contact identification, and quarantine. The second phase – community mitigation – considers actions such as school closings, canceling of large community events, and promoting virtual or video faith and other services.

While Minnesota has not, at this time, had any known community transmission of COVID-19 (all so far have been travel-related illnesses), public health will start moving to the “minimal to moderate” level of implementing community mitigation to slow transmission of the disease.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has mitigation strategy guidelines, including actions for home, schools/childcare sites, assisted living facilities, work places, health care settings, and community and faith-based organizations. The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) is going through those guidelines and making more specific recommendations for Minnesota.

The Minnesota Department of Health has set up a public hotline that will be open from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. from Mondays to Fridays. The hotline number is 651-201-3920.

Health officials announce community-level strategies to slow COVID-19 in Minnesota

Friday, March 13: The Minnesota Department of Health announced a series of community-level strategies to help slow the spread of novel coronavirus in Minnesota communities. With a total of 14 cases of travel-associated COVID-19 now confirmed in Minnesota (as of Friday, March 13), health officials urge swift action to limit the spread of the infection and reduce its impacts on our communities and our health care system.

The broad set of recommendations will remain in place until further notice, and touch on many aspects of society, including families, faith-based organizations, employers, assisted living facilities, schools, and health care settings. Each strategy is designed to make person-to-person transmission less likely by reducing the close-contact interactions (interactions with others within 6 feet for 10 minutes or more) that tend to result in passing along the illness. The full set of recommendations is available on the Minnesota Department of Health's Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) website.

Key items on the list include:

- Event organizers should cancel or postpone gatherings with 250 or more people, including concerts, conferences, professional and amateur performances, or sporting events.
- Event organizers should cancel or postpone smaller events (those with less than 250 people) that are held in settings that do not allow social distancing of 6 feet per person.
- Event organizers should limit attendance to no more than 10 people for events where the majority of participants are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.
- People and families at higher risk of severe COVID-19 illness should stay at home and avoid gatherings or other situations of potential exposures, including travel.
- Employers should make telework arrangements for workers whose duties can be done remotely.
- Employers should stagger work schedules and limit non-essential work travel.
- Health care facilities and assisted-living facilities should more strictly limit visitors.
- Faith-based organizations should offer video or audio.
- Hospitals and other health care facilities should implement triage before entering facilities (for example, parking lot triage, phone triage, and telemedicine to limit unnecessary visits).

The Minnesota recommendations include school-specific guidance for limiting close-contact interactions. However, consistent with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Minnesota Department of Health has not recommended that K-12 schools close unless specifically advised to do so by health officials. However, as the situation evolves there may be points where specific or broad closures would be ordered.

Parents of children and teens with underlying health conditions should consider distance learning as a precaution.

Shopping for groceries and other items is not affected by these recommendations, although it is a good idea to limit close contact when you do so – and people who are sick should not be shopping. They should stay home until they recover.

The recommendations to avoid mass gatherings do not pertain to normal operations of airports, bus and train stations, medical facilities, libraries, shopping malls and centers, or other spaces where 100 or more people may be in transit. Even so, people in high-risk categories (the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions) should limit such activities.

According to Minnesota Commissioner of Health Jan Malcolm, these recommendations show that every Minnesota resident and organization has an important role to play in protecting our state from the risks of this disease. “We know these strategies will impact the lives of all Minnesotans, but we are hopeful we can reduce the impacts of this outbreak by working together,” Malcolm said. “All Minnesotans share the risks and the responsibilities now.”

“For everyone, the responsibility first and foremost is to stay home when you are sick,” Malcolm added. “I want to make it clear that this applies to everyone – no exceptions during a serious outbreak like this.”

Since the outbreak started in December 2019, more than 134,000 cases and 4,967 deaths have been reported worldwide, including 1,701 U.S. cases and 40 deaths as of Friday, March 13.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is spread primarily by respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how influenza spreads. It can also spread when people touch contaminated surfaces and then touch their faces.

More information can be found on MDH's Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) website. MDH has set up a COVID-19 public hotline – that is open 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. – at 651-201-3920.

CITY OF PAYNESVILLE**City discussing possible rental ordinance****Ordinance could address safety concerns in rental units in the city**

By Michael Jacobson

“Being in my position in public works and a building official, I’m in nearly every home in town,” said building inspector Brad Mehlhop to the city council at their meeting on Monday, March 9. “A rental ordinance, I believe, would alleviate some of the safety issues that could be happening with rental units. There also is a considerable risk of blight in neighborhoods where rental units aren’t being taken care of. Safety is priority #1.”

Mehlhop shared a rental ordinance from the City of Hutchinson, as an example, with the council, though members thought that version might be too elaborate and demanding for Paynesville.

The City of Hutchinson charges \$20 per unit per year for its inspection fee. That is a single apartment would be charged \$20 for inspection, a duplex \$40, and so on.

Questions from the council included whether such a detailed ordinance is needed, whether now, without a full-time city administrator, is the right time to pursue one, and whether the \$20 annual inspection fee would cover city costs.

Councilor Alicia LaBeau, noting that the city already has a shortage of housing, didn’t think enacting a rental ordinance would encourage more housing.

The planning commission wasn’t convinced about the City of Hutchinson’s rental ordinance either, said councilor or Shawn Reinke. That’s why they brought it to the full council to see what interest there is in a rental ordinance.

Another question would be how the city identified all the rental units in town. “It’s like licensing dogs and cats,” said city attorney Bill Spooner of the challenge.

Interim city administrator Belinda Ludwig said utility records could help the city identify rental units.

“We need something, but I don’t know what it is,” said councilor Len Gilmore.

Mayor Jeff Thompson said it’s always a balance between overreach and public safety.

“Personally, I feel it’s too much government overreach,” said LaBeau, who said property owners should be responsible for the safety of their houses and buildings, “whether living there themselves or not.”

“I assure you if people were already doing that, I wouldn’t be here,” said Mehlhop of his safety concerns. Renters should be able to get out of a bedroom safely, he stressed, of the need to have proper exits.

The council agreed to go forward in investigating a rental ordinance, including some landlords on the committee, as well as Mehlhop and other city staff.

In Other Business...

•The council accepted the resignation of police officer Carter Lentz, as of Monday, March 23.

Already short one officer, with another out for medical leave, the council approved having school-resource officers Jerome Feigum (a retired state trooper) and Anthony LaPatka (a retired Willmar Police officer) do some patrols, along with Steve Lehmkuhl of Paynesville (a retired Stearns County deputy).

The city is in the hiring process and hopes to hire two new officers, but it will take three months of training to get a new officer ready to work independently, said police chief Paul Wegner.

•The council gave the OK to the ad hoc library committee to study all options when it comes to a future location of the Paynesville Public Library. The committee had asked the council if they could explore moving the library to the current city hall and moving city hall to the old Shopko building. “The purpose of the board was to find out what will work

best and if that means thinking outside the box then do it,” said Reinke. “Run.”

“I myself kind of like that idea,” said councilor Neil Herzberg. “We have some parking issues. ...It would meet my criteria of keeping the library downtown.”

Councilor Len Gilmore said to explore all the options but he would need to have a good plan at the end of the process. If the city would rent or remodel, how would those costs be better than owning its current building, he added.

The current library is 2,800 sq. ft. and maybe 1,200 sq. ft. could be added at the current location. The building is owned by the city, but the library is run by the Great River Regional Library system. A study indicated a library size between 4,000 and 6,000 sq. ft.

•The council set a variance hearing for Fortitude Senior Living of Paynesville, the proposed 55-and-older apartments along Highway 55, for Monday, April 13, at 6:30 p.m. The owners are now proposing a four-story structure with most of the parking underground.

However, it would be 60-feet tall, while the city limits building heights to 35 feet, thus requiring a 25-foot variance.

Allowing a four-story building would maximize green space and keep the building to the east side of the lot, away from the single-family homes on the west side.

•The council approved an employee exit interview policy and an employee exit questionnaire. The purpose is not to fault employees who leave, said Reinke. “It’s really to figure out what we’re doing well as a city and what we can improve,” he said.

•The council reviewed the budget for the 18th annual Paynesville Area Water Festival. Every spring, fifth graders learn about water at Koronis Ministries with participants such as the DNR, the Koronis Lake Association, the North Fork Crow River Watershed District, Stearns County Soil and Water District, the National Honor Society, and

local teachers.

This year’s event is scheduled for Friday, May 8.

The budget is \$1,330, with the city already having \$1,350 in donations for the event.

•The council approved the purchase of a new 2020 Police Interceptor utility vehicle from Yarmon Ford of Paynesville for \$32,799. Yarmon beat the state bid, provided by Tenvoorde Ford of St. Cloud.

•The council also approved purchasing a new Dell Latitude 5420 laptop for the new squad car for \$2,411.25. The Paynesville Police currently use Panasonic Toughbooks, but are going to try the Dell Latitude, which are used by Stearns County.

•The council approved the purchase of new office furniture for the police chief’s office from Northern Business Products for \$2,821, including desk, filing cabinets, and wall storage unit.

•The council approved a new contract with the City of Lake Henry for the City of Paynesville’s help in running their sewer system. (Lake Henry handles the day-to-day operation, but Paynesville provides additional labor and expertise.) The proposed rate changes in the new contract are: public works staff, up to \$62.30 per hour from \$45; clerical staff, up to \$74.20 per hour from \$48; and public works director, up to \$93.68 from \$70.

•The council approved a payment of \$607,251.40 to Eagle Construction Company for work down on the sewer expansion project through Wednesday, Feb. 26. They are building a sewer expansion for AMPI (\$3.6 million total). The system, expanding the capacity of the city’s sewer system, should be finished this spring.

•Public works director Ron Mergen said the compost site could open in mid April, the annual hazardous waste collection and spring cleanup is scheduled from 8 to 11 a.m. on Saturday, April 25, and the fly-in at the airport is scheduled for Sunday, Aug. 9, with four air shows already booked.

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operations on Tuesday, March 31, following our previously scheduled teacher in-service day on Monday, March 30. The only people allowed on school grounds during the current school closure are school personnel.”

“Effective Wednesday, March 18, the MSHSL has suspended all spring activities and athletics through Friday, March 27. In the event that circumstances change, an additional announcement will be sent out to all families.”

School in Paynesville was optional on Monday, March 16, and Tuesday, March 17, with any family not feeling safe or comfortable able to keep their children at home as an excused absence. “The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly changing with each passing hour of each day,” concluded Bullard. “As protocols change, we will issue new communications for all families. We ask that families keep the school district informed of COVID-19-related issues among students and family members as well.”

CentraCare Health limiting visitors at all its locations

Thursday, March 12: To protect its patients, families, and health care workers during the outbreak of COVID-19, CentraCare Health will be implementing temporary visitor restrictions to all CentraCare facilities. “Effective immediately, we are no longer allowing visitors at CentraCare hospitals, long-term care facilities, senior housing, and sites where individuals are housed in large numbers. After careful consideration, we made this difficult choice because our top priority must be the safety of our patients, staff, and communities,” CentraCare announced on Thursday, March 12.

Visitors impacted by this policy include patient family and friends, students, volunteers, and non-essential contracted vendors. Exceptions will be made for patient family members under special circumstances such as unstable/critically ill patients, parents of minors, and end-of-life patients.

The visitation restrictions apply to all CentraCare locations. This is a rapidly evolving situation and CentraCare will take additional steps to help control the spread of COVID-19, as necessary. “We understand that interacting with friends and family can be helpful to the healing process and strongly encourage patients to connect with family members through other forms of communication, such as phone calls and video chats on cell phones or other mobile devices,” said CentraCare.

If you have symptoms of respiratory illness, please call CentraCare Connect at 320-200-3200 to speak with a nurse, 24/7.

Paynesville foodshelf to offer food items by drive-up service

Monday, March 16: The Paynesville Community Service Center must stop all use donations at this time as personal items also carry germs, so the household portion of the foodshelf will be closed. Food items will be offered – from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. from Tuesdays to Fridays. The foodshelf will offer drive-up service, with clients staying in their cars. Unfortunately, despite the need, the Paynesville Community Service Center cannot accept any new volunteers at this time, as they have been asked to keep its staff limited. “We will do our BEST to keep the foodshelf open!” said director Allison Janssen.

Governor orders K-12 schools to close starting Wednesday

Sunday, March 15: Gov. Tim Walz (DFL-Mankato) signed Executive Order 20-02, authorizing the temporary closure of Minnesota K-12 public schools to students in order for school administrators and teachers to make long-term plans for the continuity of education and essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools will be closed to students by Wednesday, March 18, through Friday, March 27, to accommodate this planning between school staff, teachers, and administrators with guidance from the Minnesota Department of Education) and the Minnesota Department of Health.

“My top priority as governor is the safety of Minnesotans. As a former teacher, and father of two teenage kids, I’m especially focused on the safety of our children,” said Walz. “I am ordering the temporary closure of schools so educators can make plans to provide a safe learning environment for all Minnesota students during this pandemic. Closing schools is never an easy decision, but we need to make sure we have plans in place to educate and feed our kids regardless of what’s to come.”

Executive Order 20-02 requires schools to provide care for elementary-age children of health care professionals, first responders, and other emergency workers during previously planned school days to ensure Minnesota’s first line of defense against COVID-19 can stay on the job.

The Executive Order also makes provisions for the continuity of mental health services and requires schools to continue providing meals to students in need.

“The safety and well-being of our students is always our top priority,” said Minnesota Department of Education commissioner Mary Cathryn Ricker. “That is why we are committed to creating an education delivery model that can sustain learning, no matter the circumstances. Minnesota has long valued education, and we will continue to work with our school leaders to ensure that our students continue to receive the education they need and deserve. Educators are caring, creative people, and I am confident they are going to work to meet the needs of our students in these extraordinary times.”

The Governor advises and urges Minnesotans to continue following the Minnesota Department of Health’s community mitigation strategies during this temporary closure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 while students are not in school.

Great River Regional Library to close all branch libraries

Monday, March 16: The Great River Regional Library has made the decision to close all its libraries, based on social distancing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and the Minnesota Department of Health. All libraries closed on Monday, March 16, at 6 p.m. and will remain closed through the end of March. “We ask patrons to keep the items they currently have and not return any items at this time. All due dates and items on hold are extended through Wednesday, April 8, and will be extended as long as the libraries are closed.”

The Great River Regional Library System operates the Paynesville Public Library, which will be closed until the end of March.