

City Council discusses response to COVID-19

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
Friday, 27 March 2020 08:25



Facility closures, updated stats, preparedness drills

The Gallup City Council held a special meeting March 16 to discuss the fallout from the rise of COVID-19, specifically how numerous city facilities have been affected.

City Attorney Curtis Hayes reiterated an order from March 12 by Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham to restrict what had been classified as mass gatherings, or where groups of more than 50 people assemble. The order has since called on state restaurants and bars to either close completely or offer just takeout or delivery orders.

Hayes also mentioned the city facilities that would be closed until further notice: El Morro Theatre and Events Center, Red Rock Park Convention Center, Aquatic Center, Gallup Senior Center, Cecil Garcia Fitness Center, Larry Brian Mitchell Recreation Center, Harold Runnels Athletic Complex, Octavia Fellin Public Library and Children's Library, Gallup Veteran's Center, and the Boys and Girls Club.

All upcoming events at these city facilities will be canceled as well.

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“Things are changing rapidly,” Hayes said. “It wouldn’t be surprising with all the information coming in the past four days to see the restrictions become even more restrictive.”

After three presumptive positive cases on March 11, the number of positive tests for New Mexico has risen to 28 as of March 18.

“We’re going to have to keep monitoring what the Department of Health is telling us to do, adjust city practices as needed, and get word out to the public as far as what guidelines are for businesses,” Hayes added.

Hayes also reiterated seniors will be able to pick up lunches in a drive-thru capacity at the Senior Center, and home meal delivery and medical transportation services will still be available.

The new restrictions will also affect the runoff mayoral election slated for March 31. Hayes said there is a statute in the Election Code which will restrict the people who attend the tally of the election results.

Specifically, the statute says the city can restrict the attendance to candidates and one additional person, plus the media and everyone else who is required by law to be present, Hayes said.

Fire Chief Jesus Morales was present to give an update on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, in the U.S., there are 3,774 confirmed positive cases with 60 deaths, Morales said. These stats were as of the morning of March 16.

At the same time, there are 17 positive cases in New Mexico identified in over 580 tests. This figure includes two cases in Socorro County, ten in Bernalillo County, two in Sandoval County, and three in Roswell County.

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All 17 cases were the result of traveling to areas with infected people, Morales said.

“Right now, by isolating and following the governor’s directive, it puts us ahead of the curve,” Morales said. “By shutting down these mass gatherings, it could help to curb any mass outbreak.”

These tactics are part of a large movement to “flatten the curve,” wherein people are being encouraged to stay home and avoid large gatherings and unnecessary travel whenever possible to minimize the odds of getting infected, or risk infecting others if they have contracted the virus.

Morales said the risk to Americans is still relatively low, but the biggest risk is still to the elderly, especially those with existing health problems.

To that end, the city is staying up to date with all official information, which is then shared with the public and other communities.

“We’re continuing to monitor information daily from the Center[s] for Disease Control and the New Mexico Department of Health,” Morales said.

Morales also described a drill that occurred March 12 where local Community Service Aides were given the challenge of identifying a patient who was exhibiting symptoms common with COVID-19 to determine how the county would respond to a presumptive positive case.

“It went really well,” he said. “Our fire department personnel were impressed with the CSAs. They were asking the right questions and they determined the patient was a suspected COVID-19 case and the right arrangements were made.”

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Morales said the fire department will continue to work with both Gallup Indian Medical Center and Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services to increase the county's preparedness to respond to the virus.

City Manager Maryann Ustick described what the city is doing to follow the governor's directive to close down large public gatherings.

Ustick said the city departments will identify what employees can work from home, and be given directions to not have face-to-face meetings.

All employees working from home will be on call as needed, she added. Employees will be paid for their normal hours since their salaries have been budgeted.

Mayor Jackie McKinney said the city's essential services like trash pickup will continue. The city will keep its commitment to provide services like water and electricity to residents, he added.

McKinney closed the meeting by saying emergency services will be ready, and people have been given directions on what to do at this point.

"We'll be fine. We will be fine," he said. "I wish you all well."

By Cody Begaye
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