



Mayor Brindle's Opening Remarks May 26, 2020

Good evening, everyone, and thanks for joining us virtually tonight. Please remember that public comment will only be accepted via Zoom, although we are live streaming for viewing only on Facebook. The replay will also be available afterwards on Facebook, YouTube, and TV 36. For those of you who receive my regular COVID-19 emails, tonight's comments here will also serve as today's update.

CONFIRMED CASES

- Today, there are 155,764 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey, with another 1,083 still under investigation. Currently, the County reports 15,293 cases, with Westfield reporting no new cases since my last update on Friday, keeping our total at 274. We were advised that, due to the holiday weekend and a temporary system outage, the numbers reported today may be low. If they hold up, it would mean that we have had only five confirmed community cases (non long-term care) in the last two weeks, of which two came in the past week, and zero in the last four days. This preliminary four day trend is extremely encouraging news and a reflection of the community's commitment and adherence to social distancing.
- As always, a more detailed breakdown of statewide numbers is available online at the NJ Department of Health COVID-19 Dashboard.

STATE UPDATES

- Governor Murphy reported that the key metrics from New Jersey's hospitals continue to move in the right direction. Since the peak, new hospitalizations are down 84%, patients in hospitals are down 67%, ICU patients are down 63%, and patients on ventilators are down 66%. Thankfully, cases at long term care facilities also continue to decline, which is another encouraging trend.
- As you've probably heard by now, this morning the Governor also announced that outdoor graduation ceremonies will be permitted after July 6, with specific social distancing requirements to follow tomorrow. We have been in touch with the Board of Education throughout the last several weeks regarding potential graduation alternatives, and continue to extend an offer to provide any necessary assistance they need to honor the Westfield High School Class of 2020, which includes the delivery of graduation signs tomorrow.
- Professional sports teams in New Jersey may return to training and competition if their leagues choose to move in that direction, provided the necessary health protocols remain in place. This is, however, different from organized youth sports, which have not yet been approved to proceed.

- In other state news, the Federal Railroad Administration is awarding \$91.5 million to Amtrak and NJ TRANSIT to move the Portal Bridge project forward. This is a substantial step toward building the much needed infrastructure improvements to support commuters and economic development across the region.

LOCAL UPDATES

- Thanks to everyone who contributed to last week's food drive for the Westfield Food Pantry. Over 500 vehicles dropped off over 2,000 bags of food! Additionally, over \$18K in cash donations was collected. It was an incredible collaborative effort between the Town of Westfield, NJ Police Department, the public school district, the ministerium, and the Westfield United Fund. Thank you, thank you! It exceeded all expectations.
- Thanks also to the Martin Wallberg American Legion Post 3 for hosting a beautiful and solemn Memorial Day service at Monument Circle yesterday morning. While we missed having the public in attendance, and the annual parade that typically follows, it was a fitting tribute to those that paid the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. A special shout out goes to Police Chaplain Keith Gibbons for his role in organizing the service.
- The Recreation Department continues to make preparations to open Memorial Pool when we are permitted to do so. Today, they announced that the start of the 2020 season will be delayed past the scheduled date of June 6 to allow for proper accommodations to be made to address all social distancing requirements. Once this guidance is finalized, it will likely take several weeks to implement all related protocols, and we will let you know as soon as a final opening date is determined.

Due to these unusual circumstances, pool registration will be open on a rolling basis, with no deadline in place, until membership is sold out. At this time, registration for swim lessons and swim team are postponed until further notice. In addition, the Recreation Commission plans to discuss ongoing questions from the community regarding pro-rated refunds and full refund deadlines at its meeting next week, with more details to follow. Thanks to the Pool Committee and the Recreation Commission for their ongoing efforts to adapt and anticipate solutions in these unprecedented times.

- Switching gears, tonight we will hear an ordinance on first reading out of the Code Review and Town Property Committee to provide for the implementation of the five year tax exemption and abatement law for the recently designated area in need of rehabilitation in downtown Westfield. This follows the recent designation of the Downtown Special Improvement District as an area in need of rehabilitation, an action that was taken following input from downtown property owners and businesses as we continue to prioritize resourceful measures to enable our business owners long-term viability -- an issue that is more important now than ever before. We will be joined tonight by our Redevelopment Counsel Steve Mlenak, who will explain the specifics of the tax incentive when we introduce the ordinance.

- On a similar note, the first meeting of our Reopening Task Force was held last week, chaired by DWC Executive Director Bob Zuckerman. They are reviewing options for reopening properly to balance the needs of the business community with that of public health. We are considering closing certain streets to allow for expanded restaurant capacity and greater social distancing, but it must be weighed against the potential business impact on curbside/pick up service. Input from all stakeholders will be considered before any decisions are made, and we expect to try numerous options on a trial basis until we get it right.
- I would like to remind the artists in the community that Thursday is the deadline to submit design concepts for the Public Art Commission's first temporary installation called Art Takes Flight. The project will entail 30 sponsored fiberglass butterflies -- one for each decade of Westfield's 300 years -- to be set on concrete pedestals or affixed to trees throughout Town this summer. At the conclusion of the exhibit, some butterflies will be auctioned off to fund future public art installations, and some will be permanently installed in our parks. Thanks to the Public Arts Commission for their vision and hard work as we anticipate a very meaningful installation in the coming weeks. For more information, visit westfieldnj.gov/publicartscommission.
- The Westfield NJ - Downtown team doesn't let a pandemic get in the way of one of their major events, as Girls' Night Out becomes Girls' Night In this Thursday! Shop, connect with friends, and experience some of our downtown businesses' special offers. All of the details for the pre-party Zoom registration and merchant offers can be found on the DWC website.
- Tonight we will vote on the adoption of the 2020 Municipal Budget. As you'll recall from the presentation at our April 28 meeting, this budget reflects significant revenue uncertainty stemming from unknown future tax collection rates and lost revenue from sources like parking, courts, construction, investments, and the pool. Because the full extent of COVID-19 impact on the 2021 budget is difficult to predict, it must be considered now and we will need to adapt as the reality of our finances takes shape.

As a result, expenses have been cut by 1.3%, despite a 2.3% increase in non-discretionary costs, which is the first budget reduction in eight years. We are prepared to make additional cuts if necessary as we monitor revenue throughout the year. The proposed 1.95% municipal tax increase equates to \$55 on an average assessed home. When considered with last year's zero percent increase, and .5% in 2018, the three year average increase for residents is .8%, or \$24/year. This year, the municipal increase will be more than offset by a \$125 reduction in the County tax on the average assessed home.

Our priority remains balancing our ongoing progress on popular improvements for parks, paving, and infrastructure, with the continued need to anticipate and manage potential revenue shortfalls, while maintaining a healthy and reasonable surplus. I want to thank the Town Council Finance Committee, led by Councilwoman Habgood, for their perseverance and resolve in developing this budget not once, but twice, in order to find the best path forward.

- And lastly, in light of the positive trends we see in our community, we anticipate lifting additional restrictions regarding the use of our parks in the next few days. We are shifting from saving people to serving people, and will be increasingly focusing our efforts on how to operate in a new normal. I do not anticipate that this virus has or is going away, but if we all work together, exercise good judgment, and make decisions that are considerate of others, we should be able to ensure a manageable caseload that will yield the best outcome for our community. Thank you all again for your ongoing cooperation and consideration of others.