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Moraga Chamber's Town Hall meeting addresses COVID-19 related concerns

By Vera Kochan

Coronavirus questions and concerns were addressed by a panel of town experts under one "virtual" roof June 8 as part of a Moraga Chamber of Commerce Zoom conference organized by Executive Director Kathe Nelson.

According to Contra Costa County Supervisor Candace Andersen, new county cases of COVID-19 have been on the rise since the beginning of June. "While we were seeing our positive rates hovered around 2 to 2-1/4 %, we are now closer to 4% positive cases," she said, noting that although restrictions have been relaxed, everyone must continue to take the recommended precautions.

The county has begun hiring 75 trackers/tracers who will target the cities with the highest positive cases and begin to educate that sector of the population on the importance of COVID-19 safety precautions. The county does not want to re-impose shelter-in-place orders, but may have to slow down the easing of restrictions.

All town staff employees have returned to work in the Moraga town offices as of June 8, according to Town Manager Cynthia Battenberg. "Work spaces have been modified as needed to insure the safety of our employees," Battenberg said. "We are following COVID-19 workplace protocols to ensure people don't come to work sick and that high-touch surfaces are cleaned regularly." While the front doors still remain closed to the public, staff is available by phone, email or appointment.

Moraga Mayor Kimberleigh Korpus is hopeful that the council meetings will soon open up to the public again. Currently the public comment portion of the town council's Zoom meetings are done by emailing the town clerk in advance, as opposed to being done in "real time," and the comment is read out loud. This process will continue, Korpus said, "for a variety of security related issues, in addition to the fact that we currently have a process that's working."

Moraga Police Chief Jon King thanked the community for their support, noting that all Moraga police officers have remained on regular duty and are healthy. The MPD has only made educational contact with the public regarding COVID-19 referrals to the health department. No enforcement actions were necessary. Crime statistics have been much lower than last year due to SIP, however property crimes have begun to rise again (auto burglaries and theft).

Parks and Recreation Director Breyana Brandt reported that her department suffered a huge impact from COVID-19 and the resulting cancellation of weddings, special celebrations and town events. "Over the past weeks that we have been SIP, it really showcased the importance of parks and open spaces as being so fundamental to our health and wellness," she stated. "Our parks and trails have seen unprecedented use during these times." However, they have received numerous complaints about people not adhering to social distancing and wearing masks. Brandt reminded residents that playgrounds, play structures, basketball and volleyball courts are still closed.

Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker spoke about his crew having to work through the COVID-19 outbreak at the skilled nursing facility in Orinda, which resulted in almost all of its residents and a majority of the staff testing positive. "In response to that, we've enacted enhanced personal protective equipment measures to protect our firefighters and support from the Rescue One Foundation." He added, "We've sourced and put in service enhanced decontamination procedures for the back of the ambulance as well."

Saint Mary's College Assistant Vice President of Alumni and Community Engagement Mary Poppingo discussed the financial impact to the college and eventual need to cut costs, and cited the importance to "do all we can to get us back to doing what we do best, which is namely in-person instruction and providing students with a residential experience." Fall classes are tentatively expected to resume Aug. 24, with the reconfiguration of class size and on-campus housing layouts.

Acalanes Union High School District Superintendent John Nickerson, who assured everyone that the school district was closely examining state and county guidelines, touched on parental concerns regarding opening up schools. "Social distancing will be a challenge, but the basic model we're looking at is to do a six-foot distancing and to have no more than half the students in a classroom at a single time." Nickerson added that they will be depending on students' behavior and helping them understand they're doing social distancing for the community. Masks will be required.

Whether classes will be online or in-person is yet to be determined, but the district has plans for multiple scenarios: to open up and allow all students on campus at the same time, albeit with many restrictions; allow distance learning from home with opportunities to come to school; or a blended scenario whereby half the student body would be allowed on campus at a time with distance learning on other days (see related story above). Moraga School District Superintendent Bruce Burns acknowledged the tremendous effort both teachers and parents have done to keep students on point with their learning agenda given the circumstances. The district distributed hundreds of computers to families for participation in distance learning. "MSD is planning to open on Aug. 11, and what it looks like now is yet to be determined," stated Burns. "Staff has been gathering research from across the county, state, country and globally to prepare for three opening scenarios." Hoping that schools resume at a high level of normalcy, there is the possibility of all instruction continuing via distance learning. A blended model would allow students on campuses part-time in conjunction with distance learning. The challenge of social distancing and mask wearing is being examined with input from a few schools that have remained open during the shelter-in-place order.

The MSD's budget is experiencing a COVID-19 shortfall. "Thankfully, we have a healthy reserve - a rainy day fund, but it is raining." Burns added, "We'll exhaust that shortly, and in addition, we'll need to make significant reductions."

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