



GASTON COUNTY

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PRESS RELEASE

GASTON COUNTY DECLARES STATE OF EMERGENCY

GASTONIA, N.C. – Gaston County Board of Commissioners Chairman Tracy Philbeck declared a State of Emergency on Sunday, effective immediately.

That declaration includes a mandatory restriction on gatherings of greater than 50 people.

County leaders on Thursday, March 12, announced they were strongly urging residents to avoid such gatherings as a means of social distancing measures recommended by health experts to slow the spread of COVID-19.

While the county does not have a presumptive or confirmed case of coronavirus yet, health officials and health care providers are already operating as if the virus is present in the community.

“We recognize we’re asking a lot from our residents,” Board Chairman Tracy Philbeck said. “But we simply cannot risk overrunning our health system if we do not take these precautions now. The short-term inconvenience is worth it if it means we can save lives and lessen this spread of this virus.”

Leaders discussed in detail what the mandatory restriction would mean, and carved out exemptions for schools and licensed businesses. The county strongly recommends, however, that those entities do what they can to minimize person-to-person contact; utilize teleworking and split shifts; and be cognizant of the needs of those who are immunocompromised or elderly, as those population groups are particularly affected.

On Sunday, County leaders held a press conference that included remarks from Chairman Philbeck, Rep. John Torbett (R-Gaston County), CaroMont Health Chief Medical Officer Dr. Todd Davis, Gaston County Schools Superintendent Dr. Jeffrey Booker, Gaston County Police Chief Joseph Ramey, District 27A Chief District Court Judge John Greenlee and Department of Health and Human Services Director Chris Dobbins.

Ramey emphasized that in working with police departments from across the county, the goal is to get residents to voluntarily follow the temporary order.

Booker said that while the schools are closed for the next two weeks because of Gov. Roy Cooper's order on Saturday, the district is already looking at implementing its summer feeding program beginning on Tuesday.

He emphasized that the situation is rapidly evolving, and noted the best place for parents and staff to go for up-to-date information on school district plans is their website, Gaston.k12.nc.us.

Judge Greenlee also noted the historic nature of the closings, saying that while the order had come down to suspend nearly all hearings for 30 days, the Gaston County Courthouse would remain open. The caveat, he said, is they want people to come only if absolutely necessary, as court officials work to keep working conditions for staff as safe as possible.

The county continues to provide resources to its residents. On Wednesday, it established a local hotline for anyone who has questions or concerns about coronavirus – or for anyone who is concerned they may have symptoms of the virus. That number is 704-862-5303.

County Health and Human Services Director Chris Dobbins said the hotline is staffed by Gaston County Public Health officials Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The number rolls over to the state hotline during non-business hours. Dobbins said at Sunday's press conference that the county is already looking at expanding those hours.

Dobbins is pushing the message to residents of "Call Before You Come." Put simply, Public Health wants residents to call their primary care providers and describe their symptoms and get instructions for what to do.

"Now is not the time to panic," Dobbins said. "Now is the time to ask, 'How can I help my neighbor?'"

County manager Dr. Kim Eagle is working with department directors in Gaston County to explore more opportunities to work from home to reduce the number of employees on site at any one time. Gaston County employs more than 1,600 people across a number of different buildings and dozens of departments.

Eagle said it was critical for her to protect the well-being of her employees, while also continuing to serve the public.

The county has a plan in place to further reduce on-site staffing should an outbreak in Gaston County occur.

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