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**MEETING**

**DATE:** June 8, 2020

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

**FROM:** Frank A. Rush, Jr., City Manager

**SUBJECT:** City Manager Update Regarding COVID-19

**ACTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED**

The City Manager will update the City Council and the public on the latest developments regarding COVID-19 in the City of Big Bear Lake. Council may also consider and take additional COVID-19 actions deemed necessary or helpful as a result of public comment, Council discussion, and new information that emerges regarding COVID-19.

##### **BACKGROUND**

The City has been heavily engaged in COVID-19 planning, protection, response, and recovery efforts for the past 3+ months, and remains heavily engaged. The City’s focus has clearly shifted toward recovery efforts over the past few weeks, with the City focused on coordinating the continued resumption of (“the new”) normal life while promoting the health and safety of our residents and visitors.

As of June 8, nearly all City businesses are permitted to operate under the Governor’s Resilience Roadmap through a variance secured by San Bernardino County on May 23. There remain certain types of businesses that are not permitted to operate under the Governor’s Resilience Roadmap, and some of these businesses remain closed. Some of these businesses have chosen to reopen anyway, and the City is not enforcing the Governor’s orders with regard to which types of businesses may or may not operate. As discussed numerous times in recent weeks, the City’s basic approach has been to promote responsible behavior by ALL businesses, and not make judgments regarding which types of business may or may not operate. There remain valid questions about the rationale for which types of businesses may or may not operate under the Governor’s Resilience Roadmap, and I remain hopeful that the Governor will soon officially allow ALL types of businesses to operate with appropriate health and safety measures in place. The timeline for any further adjustments by the Governor is uncertain at this time.

The City continues to closely monitor the number of confirmed cases in the City and nearby unincorporated areas. As of June 5, there are now a total of 7 confirmed cases in the City and 3 in unincorporated areas, for a total of 10. The latest case was announced on June 5, and is the first new case in our area in nearly 1 month. As you know, day visitors began returning to Big Bear on weekends in late April and early May, and overnight visitors were first authorized in vacation rentals in mid-May. There were relatively large crowds in Big Bear during Memorial Day weekend, and we expect moderate-sized crowds in Big Bear during the month of June. There are valid concerns about the potential for our visitors to carry COVID-19 with them from their home communities and therefore increase the incidence of COVID-19 in our community. City staff continue to maintain a dialogue with public health and other officials to monitor the potential increase in COVID-19 cases in Big Bear, and will report any significant increase in the number of cases as they occur.

It is widely believed that COVID-19 symptoms will present within 2 – 14 days of exposure (if they present at all). It is important to note that it has now been more than 1 month since day visitors began returning to Big Bear, approximately 3 weeks since overnight visitors returned, and approximately 2 weeks since the Memorial Day weekend. It is critical that diligent monitoring efforts continue in the coming weeks to assess the impact of this visitation on the incidence of COVID-19 in Big Bear, and that the City be prepared to adjust in any way helpful to keep our community safe. It is important to note, however, that there will absolutely be additional cases of COVID-19 in our community (and in every community) in the future, regardless of efforts taken by the City or other governments, and I encourage the City Council and everyone in our community to review the incidence of additional cases with a rational and thoughtful perspective. The reality is that our community has been fortunate to avoid a significant incidence of COVID-19 for the duration of this event, but has, in fact, experienced a total of 10 cases. The reality for all of us, in every community, is that COVID-19 will continue to be present in our communities, and it’s most important to manage the risk and impacts in an effective, thoughtful, and balanced manner.

The City also continues to closely monitor hospital and ventilator availability locally and regionally. Thankfully, the local and regional healthcare systems have not been overwhelmed by COVID-19 at any point in the past 3+ months, and sufficient capacity continues to exist to assist COVID-19 patients. Additionally, the number of suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients hospitalized has declined significantly since mid-April and has stabilized since that time. A sufficient number of hospital beds, ICU beds, and ventilators remain available in San Bernardino County, and trends are positive.

The City continues to aggressively promote responsible behavior by our residents, businesses, and visitors, emphasizing the need to maintain 6 ft. of separation whenever near others, the wearing face coverings at any time interacting with others, and practicing good hygiene (hand-washing, hand sanitizing). Although face coverings are not required by the Governor, the County, or the City, the City continues to recommend that all persons carry face coverings and use them when around others or visiting any business. The City has partnered with the Big Bear Chamber of Commerce and Visit Big Bear to distribute free masks to our visitors, and will continue these efforts.

The City organized a Big Bear COVID-19 drive-thru testing event that was conducted on April 17. Additionally, testing is now widely available to anyone who believes they need to be tested, and City staff are working with County officials to schedule additional swab testing and antibody testing at City Hall later this month. Although questions remain about the accuracy and validity of antibody testing, we believe this information will be helpful as the City continues to manage the COVID-19 event in our community.

Finally, the City implemented significant public communication efforts to keep our community well-informed about COVID-19 in OUR community. Nearly daily updates were provided from mid-March until early June, and, as we continue to resume (“the new”) normal life, there is less and less changing information. As a result, the City’s COVID-19 updates will now only be released as new or significant information emerges. New City updates will be released as often as necessary in the future, but I would generally expect to issue updates 2 – 3 times per week going forward.

**DISCUSSION**

As we go forward, City staff are working closely with County officials, other government officials, the Big Bear business community, and other stakeholders to achieve two key goals: a) keep our community healthy and SAFE, and b) promote a successful economic recovery by keeping our community OPEN. These two key goals go hand in hand, and everyone should recognize that we need both to keep Big Bear Lake a special place – for our residents, second home owners, investors, businesses, and visitors.

There are several notable issues for Council to consider going forward, and I welcome any feedback, suggestions, and direction from Council at the June 8 meeting.

* **July 4 Fireworks**

As of June 5, the July 4 fireworks display is still on, however, we (the City and Visit Big Bear, the co-sponsors) are intentionally waiting until the last minute to make a decision to postpone. As you know, the fireworks contract includes a clause that allows the display to be rescheduled to any date between July 4 and October 31 without penalty. At this point, we are targeting June 19 or June 22 as the decision date for this year’s display.

The Governor continues to prohibit large gatherings and the County has indicated that drive-up fireworks events (presumably viewed from a car or personal residence) are all that are permitted at this time. I remain hopeful that additional guidance will emerge between now and June 19, and that that guidance will aid our decision-making. Council should note that the Rotary Club has cancelled its annual fundraiser event for this year, but is still willing to provide volunteer services for the July 4 fireworks show as needed. I have informally communicated to the Rotary Club that we’ll provide definitive guidance no later than June 22.

I remain hopeful that our community will be able to enjoy fireworks on July 4, as many other communities have cancelled fireworks displays or have committed to drive-up events. Although I have not yet experienced a July 4 in Big Bear Lake, I have managed other communities with large July 4 crowds, and recognize the unique impacts of such an event. I am optimistic that our community can effectively manage such an event this year and promote effective health and safety measures to keep our community safe. It is important to note that the event is outdoors, in many cases individuals are actually closer together in an indoor shopping or dining environment than watching fireworks, and there have been very large protest gatherings that have occurred in recent weeks where individuals are likely closer together than they will be during our fireworks display.

* **Free Mask Distribution**

The City recently purchased 10,000 masks for free distribution to visitors in The Village, and with help from Visit Big Bear, the Chamber, and the Interact Club, set up two distribution tents in The Village during the weekend of May 30-31 and June 6-7. The City and Visit Big Bear recently ordered 20,000 additional masks (sharing the cost equally), and we intend to distribute free masks to every business in The Village (and any other businesses in other areas of the City who request them) in the next week.

The City, Visit Big Bear, and the Chamber continue to encourage our businesses to voluntarily require face coverings of all patrons, and we are hopeful that by providing the masks for free it will further encourage the use of face coverings. The target group for our free face mask distributions is our visitors.

* **Additional Efforts to Promote 6 Ft. of Separation in The Village**

For the most part, our residents, businesses, and visitors seem to be acting responsibly to minimize the potential for transmission of COVID-19, however, it has been difficult to maintain 6 feet of separation in The Village on weekends.

The City’s special ad hoc committee and the City Council both discussed the potential closure of Village Drive and Pine Knot Avenue to vehicles in an effort to provide more room for pedestrians to spread out, but the City has not implemented this strategy. This idea continues to surface in discussions with various businesses and residents, and may be worth considering for implementation on a trial basis on an upcoming June weekend.

Under the proposal discussed by the ad hoc committee and the City Council, Village Drive and Pine Knot Avenue would be closed to motor vehicles from approximately 10 am Saturday morning until 6 pm Sunday afternoon. Appropriate efforts would be made to allow for access to businesses without other access to their buildings.

* **Special Events**

The City previously announced that all special events in June have been postponed or cancelled, and we expect to review planned July events later this month. The number of new COVID-19 cases, any forthcoming adjustments to the Governor’s or County’s guidance, the lead time necessary to plan special events, and the lead time for event participants to sign up will all factor into these decisions. These decisions will be coordinated by the City (with assistance from Rick Bates), Visit Big Bear, and event organizers.

Council and the community should note that, assuming various events can proceed and the incidence of COVID-19 remains low in Big Bear, it is likely that many events will be rescheduled for August, September, and October.

* **Antibody Testing**

As noted earlier, the City continues to work with County public health officials to complete antibody testing for ALL residents of Big Bear. The County is currently working to organize a testing event in the City Hall (Performing Arts Center / Hofert Hall) later in June, and details will be communicated once they are finalized.

There may also be other COVID-19 issues that Council wishes to discuss, and I am happy to provide any requested information, answer any pertinent questions, and/or implement any desired initiatives to a) keep our community healthy and SAFE, and b) promote a successful economic recovery by keeping our community OPEN.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

The City has incurred direct expenses of approximately $50,000 to respond to the COVID-19 event thus far, and this amount is manageable. This estimate includes approximately $15,000 for the purchase of face masks described above.

The City expects to lose up to $1 million of TOT and sales tax revenue due to the COVID-19 event and resulting “stay at home” orders, and has implemented appropriate budget adjustments to address these projected losses. It is important to note that the City’s TOT revenue estimate is conservative, and essentially assumes no TOT revenue for the 2nd and 3rd quarters of 2020, but does assume a return to normal for the 4th quarter and beyond. I remain hopeful that no further “stay at home” orders will be mandated for Big Bear Lake later this year, as it will have a second devastating economic impact on our businesses, our community, and the City. For many reasons, no one wants to see our local economy completely shut down again.

The City has not yet expended any funds from the $100,000 CDBG grant awarded for COVID-19 activities, and the City still has approximately 2 years to spend these funds on an eligible activity. Additionally, it is likely that the City will soon receive approximately $50,000 - $65,000 of additional funding through the Federal CARES Act for COVID-19 activities.

**ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS**

None requiring review under the California Environmental Quality Act.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

I look forward to updating the City Council and the public on COVID-19 issues in Big Bear Lake, and look forward to your questions, suggestions, and direction as we move forward.

**Attachments:**

None.