

Missouri, Kansas sides split on dates of new orders

BY ALLISON KITE

AND SARAH RITTER

AKITE@KCSTAR.COM

SRITTER@KCSTAR.COM

Much of the Kansas City region will remain under stay-at-home orders into May to combat the spread of the [novel coronavirus](#), residents learned Thursday. But unlike previous order announcements, cities and counties on either side of the state line aren't singing the same tune.

Kansas City Mayor [Quinton Lucas on Thursday announced he would extend the city's lockdown](#) until May 15, a date [recommended by health directors from across the metro](#).

But later that morning, Johnson and Wyandotte counties announced they would remain under Kansas' statewide COVID-19 stay-at-home order, which Gov. Laura Kelly extended from April 19 to May 3, rather than following the lead of Kansas City.

"Mayor (David) Alvey from Wyandotte County and I decided to take a different approach because of the governor's continuation of the stay-at-home order in Kansas," Johnson County Commission Chairman Ed Eilert said. "That time period gives us 10 days or so to collect additional data."

Lucas, in an interview with The Star announcing the extension, noted that [Kansas City announced its original stay-at-home order last month in "lockstep"](#) with surrounding counties in Kansas and Missouri. He said it was important to continue and eventually lift restrictions the same way.

Lucas and Kansas City's Health Department director, Rex Archer, stressed repeatedly in a [news conference on the steps of City Hall](#) Thursday that their May 15 extension was designed to get the city through and beyond its projected peak of coronavirus cases in late April. Reopening businesses and resuming normal life too early, they said, could result in a second wave of infections.

"I know as someone who spoke to a family that lost someone this week — a Kansas City, Missouri, paramedic — I am not comfortable just saying that we should reopen when that may lead to someone's loss of life. Ask if you want that to be your mother, your father, your cousin, your brother, your spouse."

On Monday, Billy Birmingham, an [EMT with the Kansas City Fire Department](#), died of complications from COVID-19, marking the first such death among first responders in the area.

Lucas noted Kansas City was acting on the advice of several public health officials from across the region.

“I am confident that if you are a responsible local government official in the Kansas City area, then you will have May 15 as your date,” Lucas said.

He said he was not accusing Wyandotte and Johnson counties of acting irresponsibly.

“I’m not elected to run anywhere other than here,” he said, adding that he wouldn’t second guess other elected officials’ choices.

“To the extent that we have differences ... we’ll try to at least recommend to them that this is the right way to go and we hope they’ll follow it. To the extent they don’t, I think we’ll be able to handle that, too, but we’ll make sure that Kansas City is safe.”

Also on Thursday, [Missouri Gov. Mike Parson extended his order](#) banning gatherings of 10 or more people for another week, until May 3. After that, Parson said, he plans to begin re-opening the state so “people can go back to work.” But areas that have been hardest hit by COVID-19, such as Kansas City and St. Louis, may take longer to fully re-open, Parson said.

Indeed, Jackson County and the cities of Lee’s Summit, North Kansas City and Independence on Thursday announced they would extend their stay-at-home orders until May 15, as Kansas City did.

Elected officials in both Clay and Platte counties said it is up to their public health officers to decide on extending COVID-19 orders, but no announcements have been made. Like many, Clay County Presiding Commissioner Jerry Nolte said he is worried about the economy.

“Obviously we need to protect public health, but I’m a little concerned that maybe there’s not enough thought being given to when we come out of this,” he said. “How is it that we rebuild the parts of our economy that are so heavily damaged?”

AN EARLIER PEAK IN KANSAS

Eilert said Kansas’ order was extended beyond the state’s estimated peak date of about April 20. That date is based on data of cases in the entire state, including rural counties with fewer coronavirus cases.

Officials estimate a later peak date, about April 28 — give or take a couple of days — for the Kansas City metro.

“There are viable reasons for why those two dates are apart. But the May 3 date does give us in Kansas the opportunity to collect additional data, look at trend lines and make a determination as to whether or not we want to go beyond May 3,” Eilert said.

Joseph LeMaster, Johnson County’s public health officer, said “there was coalescence around the May 15 date” based on the later estimated peak for the greater Kansas City area.

“The Kansas governor’s decision to extend the statewide stay-at-home order to May 3 was based on a peak date about two weeks earlier, which included data from rural counties in western Kansas that have been less hard hit by the virus,” said LeMaster, who was one of several public health officials quoted in a press release advocating a May 15 extension, though the county did not follow that advice.

Allen Greiner, chief medical officer for the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, who also signed on to that release, said Kelly’s order had “given medical professionals and local leaders time to further examine the data.

“The data will drive our decision making during this time,” he said in a release the Unified Government issued Thursday announcing it would stick to Kelly’s order.

But Archer said social-distancing needs across states vary widely.

“Always cities have a bigger problem with any communicable disease,” Archer said. “It takes off faster; it’s harder to control.”

Whether local officials can roll back restrictions next month — on May 3 or May 15 — depends on whether the number of COVID-19 cases is falling.

“Waiting two weeks after the peak date would allow us to observe if there is a sustained decrease (in cases) after the peak for about one incubation period of the virus. That additional time is important because these peak dates are estimates,” LeMaster said.

Kansas City wants to see the same before it relaxes its stay-at-home order. Lucas said officials would also evaluate whether Kansas City has enough testing and hospital capacity before they reopen businesses.

Archer said Kansas City needs to see not only a drop in the overall case load, but also in the number of cases in disadvantaged communities that “have the least ability to protect themselves.”

“How we balance this against the real concerns of people that are unemployed now because businesses are failing — those have health consequences, too,” Archer said, “so we’re starting to look at the modeling of that to find where we can best handle this.”

A SLOW REOPENING

Sanmi Areola, Johnson County’s public health director, cautioned that the county does not “live in isolation.”

When the economy is fully open, he said about 145,000 workers commute to Johnson County each day, while about 108,000 residents commute out of the county for work.

“We don’t have walls around us,” he said. “No matter what your best intentions are, if you have that many people moving back and forth, the risk is high.”

Areola warned that the county needs to take a slow approach to rolling back restrictions, as he expects an increase in cases once the stay-at-home order is lifted.

“The longer (the order is in place) the better it is in terms of reducing the percentage of our population that are infected,” Areola said. “No matter when we roll this back, just know the risk of recurrence has to be high. And we have to be prepared for that.”

The Johnson County Board of Commissioners agreed to appoint community representatives to a steering committee that will be tasked with forming a plan for reopening the economy.

Johnson County Manager Penny Postoak Ferguson recommended that the committee include 12 members, such as business and industry representatives, county officials, health experts, an economist, city leaders and others. The group will gather input from the community, then form an economic recovery plan, including lifting restrictions on businesses.

For Kansas City to be able to reopen, Archer said, it needs the capacity to test everyone who has come in contact with a COVID-19 patient and to be able to do community screenings. He said if the U.S. had set aside funds — the equivalent of 10% of what the economy has now lost — and spent that money on public health resources, the outbreak would be under better control.

“We wouldn’t even have to be here if we had learned from the 2003 SARS outbreak,” Archer said. “South Korea had its first case the same day we had our first case in this country, but they had the testing capability and the contact tracing capability because they had developed that. They had taken the SARS outbreak seriously. We didn’t in this country.”

Archer said Kansas City would likely have to close down businesses three or four more times over the next two years “if we do this well.”

“If we don’t do this well, it’ll be more often than that and for much worse close-downs than what we’ve had so far,” he said.

Erica Carney, the city’s emergency medical services director, encouraged those who can recover at home to do so to limit the strain on emergency rooms and hospitals.

“This is a marathon, so we are in this for the long haul, and what the end of this looks like none of us know,” Carney said.

Includes reporting by The Star’s Anna Spoerre, Mike Hendricks and Jason Hancock.

ALLISON KITE: 816-234-4088, @ALLIE_KITE