

**These minutes were approved by the Board of Chosen Freeholders on April 8, 2020.*

The Board of Chosen Freeholders of the County of Warren met in Special Emergency Session in its offices in the Wayne Dumont, Jr. Administration Building, Belvidere, New Jersey on March 16, 2020 at 7:00 p.m.

The meeting was called to order by Director Gardner and upon roll call, the following members were present: Freeholder Jason Sarnoski, Freeholder James Kern III, and Freeholder Richard Gardner. Also attending were County Administrator Alex Lazorisak, County CFO Kim Francisco and Assistant County Counsel Joe Bell IV.

Additionally, Health Officer Pete Summers, Public Safety Director Frank Wheatley and Acting Prosecutor James Pfeiffer were in attendance to provide reports.

Following the flag salute, Mr. Gardner read the following OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT statement: “ADEQUATE NOTICE OF THIS MEETING OF MARCH 16, 2020 WAS GIVEN IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT BY FORWARDING A SCHEDULE OF REGULAR MEETINGS OF THE BOARD OF CHOSEN FREEHOLDERS TO THE WARREN COUNTY CLERK, THE STAR-LEDGER, AND DAILY RECORD AND BY POSTING A COPY THEREOF ON THE BULLETIN BOARD IN THE OFFICE OF THE BOARD OF CHOSEN FREEHOLDERS. FORMAL ACTION MAY BE TAKEN BY THE BOARD OF CHOSEN FREEHOLDERS AT THIS MEETING. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IS ENCOURAGED. IN ORDER TO ASSURE FULL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, THOSE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES WHO WISH TO ATTEND THE MEETING SHOULD SUBMIT ANY REQUESTS FOR SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION ONE WEEK IN ADVANCE.”

COVID-19 UPDATE:

Warren County Health Officer Pete Summers began by saying he was pleased to report that currently, we are one of the few counties that has had no reported positive cases of COVID-19. He believed there were probably some mild cases out there, however, and we have only been able to test five individuals. There are a number of stringent criteria that have to be met to warrant administering a test.

Mr. Gardner said it was his understanding that one of the symptoms of the COVID-19 coronavirus was a dry cough, which Mr. Summers confirmed. He added that his team was looking into hospitals' ER data to learn more.

Mr. Sarnoski asked about the level of preparedness in our local hospitals; Mr. Summers said they are as prepared as they are going to be. He referred to the flattening of the line of the curve we have been seeing so much about in the media. We have to do what we can to prevent our hospitals and healthcare system from collapsing.

Mr. Summers said as of the prior Friday, all public schools went to home instruction. While he said he hadn't actually made that recommendation, he thought it was the correct action. Pennsylvania had closed its schools, and many PA residents are employed in NJ schools. Further, there has recently been a high rate of absenteeism in our schools. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the situation could last four to eight weeks. Mr. Sarnoski asked about the criteria to reopen; Mr. Summers said approval of public health officials would be required. Precisely which official(s) that would be was yet to be determined.

"We're on the low end of this outbreak," said Mr. Summers. Mr. Lazorisak marveled at how much has transpired in the last five days. He said this is uncharted territory for everyone, and will develop day-by-day.

Regarding next steps, Mr. Summers said his department's priorities are to:

- 1) Keep the health care system running in the county.
- 2) Protect the most vulnerable residents, such as senior citizens and those with compromised immune systems.
- 3) Keep essential services operational.
- 4) Reduce the community spread of COVID-19.
- 5) Keep other community services operational.

Mr. Summers said we should convince the senior population to self-isolate. "If we can help the hospitals, and help the elderly population... we can weather this," Mr. Summers said. When Mr. Sarnoski inquired about the county epidemiologist's concerns, Mr. Summers indicated a need to improve testing. "It's going to get worse before it gets better," he said, and expected disruption related to the virus to last more than two weeks, and possibly two months.

Discussion continued regarding how contagious the disease is, and human behaviors and interactions. Mr. Summers said experts have determined that being within six feet of a person for 10 minutes or more increases risk of transmission. Hence, citizens are at more risk from their coworkers than from the general public walking up to a window.

Sheriff James McDonald asked what would happen to his department if an officer tests positive for the disease. Mr. Summers said right now we are in the containment phase. The Health Department would identify individuals that had been in close contact with the infected person and quarantine them for 14 days. “So that could be a lot of your officers,” he said.

Public Safety Director Frank Wheatley then provided a report on The Communications Center and Office of Emergency Management (OEM). Mr. Wheatley said his office has been in lockstep with the Health Department and County Administrator regarding this unfolding situation from day one. The Public Safety Department was put on lockdown since the morning of March 12. No one from the public has been allowed to enter. Call operators are asking a series of enhanced questions to protect and prepare first responders should COVID-19 be a factor. Mr. Lazorisak asked if there were any HIPAA concerns, to which Mr. Wheatley replied, “No... we are not diagnosing and do not do that over the radio.”

The Office of Emergency Management has been proactive reaching out to the following for needs assessment, and providing assistance if requested:

- First responders, to solicit levels of personal protection equipment (PPE)
- Schools, for food needs
- Warren County Correctional Center
- Hospitals, which reported currently having enough PPE on hand

Long term care facilities are closed tight, and the department has activated its Emergency Operations Center. While Mr. Wheatley was the only individual authorized to declare a County State of Emergency (a draft document has been prepared should the need arise), he provided assurances that he would only do so in coordination with the Health Officer, County Administrator, and Freeholders. He said it wouldn't be done in a vacuum. Should that occur, Mr. Wheatley said, it frees us up in terms of procurement. He has requested municipalities keep track of costs for potential future reimbursement. OEM will assist the County Human Services Department if needed.

Most departments, and Constitutional Officers, have submitted action plans to cover essential needs. Departments will likely move toward flexible hours and split shifts to separate employees. We will be exchanging information with other counties, with numerous meetings having occurred earlier this evening.

Discussion turned to Governor Murphy's Executive Order 104, implementing aggressive social distancing measures to mitigate further spread of COVID-19 in New Jersey. Among the directives, Governor Murphy's Executive Order indefinitely closes all public and private preschools, elementary and secondary schools, and institutions of higher education, as well as closing all casinos, racetracks, gyms, movie theaters, and performing arts centers. The order also mandates that all non-essential retail, recreational, and entertainment businesses must cease daily operations from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. All restaurant establishments, with or without a liquor license, are limited to offering only delivery and/or take out-services only, both during daytime hours and after 8 p.m. According to the State, All gatherings of persons in the State of New Jersey shall be limited to 50 persons or fewer, with limited exceptions; but the Federal guidelines discourage any gatherings of more than 10 people. Local law enforcement will be in charge of enforcing these directives, but the primary concern is to get the message out there that people should be self-isolating.

"We're still under the Executive Order set by the governor," Mr. Sarnoski said, "The County has no control over that... that is not the county's decision at this time." Warren County Prosecutor James Pfeiffer said law enforcement is going to be in charge of enforcing the directive, and protocols are rolling out as we speak. Regarding any charges that may be filed for noncompliance, Mr. Pfeiffer said, "The whole purpose is not to really charge anyone. The purpose is to go through every step possible to try to get people to work together and cooperate - not to get to the point where we just start to charge people." But the Executive Order is enforceable under these extreme circumstances, he said.

Price gouging was mentioned as a concern, both in brick-and-mortar locations and online. There is a task force in place in the Attorney General's Office. Local concerns can be reported to the Weights & Measures Department, but that would primarily be concerned with gas prices; others will go to Consumer Affairs in the AG's office. Citizens can also report concerns to the local authorities.

Regarding the Warren County Communications Center's succession plan should the disease infiltrate its ranks, Mr. Wheatley said the agency can continue to operate with as few as four tele communicators. If it gets beyond that point, calls will go to Morris County.

Prosecutor James Pfeiffer was next to provide an update from a law enforcement perspective. He said Mr. Lazorisak was doing an excellent job, and

forming the COVID-19 county level task force was a good idea. “Warren County is really out in front of this,” he said.

Mr. Pfeiffer said his office has already been split up, with key personnel rotating working from home, and no members of the public were being admitted to the building. He warned that the internet may become stressed due to these unique circumstances. The Prosecutor said all police departments were on board with the steps county officials are taking. He said the key will be focusing on the most serious crimes. Regarding day-to-day law enforcement and court cases, Mr. Pfeiffer said some charges may be deferred until we get through this. A closure of court activities is expected, which will create a backlog. Statutes of limitation will have to be considered; legislation is pending to expand those.

Mr. Sarnoski asked about any impact on Bail Reform and Speedy Trial requirements. Mr. Pfeiffer said the Bail Reform system is already set up with video conferencing, so he did not anticipate a problem with that, but Speedy Trial is where problems may occur. While the WCPO is prepared to move forward with pending cases to comply with Speedy Trial statutes, the difficulty will be on the court side and whether there will be enough judges. At this point, it is impossible to try a case, as juries cannot convene.

How detainees are held is not in conformance with the latest State and Federal directives regarding social distancing. Further, the law enforcement community was expecting a surge in domestic violence with additional strains of being out of work and confined at home.

County Administrator Alex Lazorisak then provided his updates to the Board. He began by thanking Department Heads and Constitutional Officers for their cooperation and coming up with contingency plans. He said everyone really stepped up. The resolution to be passed tonight will authorize the closure of the County’s facilities to the public effective the following morning, with protocols in place for providing public services. The courthouse, however, is under the jurisdiction of Superior Court.

Mr. Lazorisak said he has been on the phone with the governor’s office each day, gleaning information and putting it to use. Regular conference calls with mayors of municipalities have been instituted. Mr. Kern noted that 19 of the county’s 22 municipalities have participated so far, which was great. He thought facilitating direct access to the Warren County Health Department was beneficial to them, as

there are no municipal health departments in Warren County. “The more communication, the better,” Mr. Kern said.

A section on the home page of the official Warren County website has been blocked off to be solely devoted to providing COVID-19 information and updates to the public and employees. “So far, so good,” Public Information Officer Art Charlton responded to Mr. Sarnoski’s question regarding how information dissemination was working out, between the departments of IT and Public Information. IT Director Bob Sidie provided a technical update regarding conference calling capacities, and other tools and capabilities available to enable employees to work remotely. One hundred simultaneous users can be accommodated on a conference call, but increasing the volume of these practices do bring an increased risk for malware. Mr. Sidie said it would probably take about a week to get all the pieces in place for eligible employees to work remotely.

Regarding personnel issues, Mr. Lazorisak said of the county’s approximately 450 employees, essential employees have to be defined. Employees were to report to work the following day, even though buildings will be closed to the public. Employees opting to stay home to care for children who will now be home due to school closures will be permitted to take sick days for that purpose. If they deplete their sick days, they can start utilizing personal and vacation time to get through this.

Business will still have to be conducted by the Board of Chosen Freeholders, and it was yet to be determined the optimal way to conduct meetings going forward. Mr. Lazorisak was conferring with County Counsel on whether the Open Public Meetings Act requirements would be relaxed due to these unique circumstances, and balance that with orders not to congregate. “It’s fast,” Mr. Lazorisak said, “It’s moving fast.”

Mr. Kern said he had the “utmost faith” in Mr. Lazorisak and Mr. Wheatley in determining decisions to be made, including with regard to a potential declaration of a state of emergency.

Sheriff Jim McDonald said if one his officers has symptoms or tests positive and had to be quarantined, he didn’t think they should have to take sick time. Mr. Lazorisak said, “If you’re suspected of it, if you test for it, you’re on sick days... that’s the county policy.”

An individual from the Sheriff’s Office seemed to protest the policy being

applied to that department. Mr. Lazorisak said details still had to be worked out and more decisions made as things develop, but he had conferred with County Counsel and Labor Counsel, and the county's sick day policy would stand for now.

RESOLUTION 147-20

On motion by Mr. Kern, seconded by Mr. Sarnoski, **RESOLUTION ENTRUSTING THE COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR WITH DECISIONS CONCERNING THE COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS AND THE DAY-TO-DAY ISSUES CONCERNING PUBLIC SAFETY, HEALTH AND WELFARE AS WELL AS CLOSURE OF THE COUNTY OFFICES TO THE PUBLIC BEGINNING MARCH 17, 2020 UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.**

WHEREAS, the Board of Chosen Freeholders has entrusted all COVID-19-Coronavirus decision to be made by the County Administrator relative to the operation of the County of Warren on a day-to-day basis; and

WHEREAS, in conjunction with the Warren County Director of Health and Director of Public Safety and Emergency Management to ensure the health, welfare and safety of our employee and residents that we proudly serve; and

WHEREAS, all Warren County offices will be closed to the public beginning on Tuesday, March 17, 2020 in order to mitigate public exposure to the COVID-19-Coronavirus until further notice; and

WHEREAS, while the County Offices are closed to the public, all County employees will continue to report to the workplace and fulfill their normal duties until further notice.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Chosen Freeholders as follows:

1. County Administrator Alex Lazorisak is entrusted with all decisions concerning the COVID-19-Coronavirus and the operation of the County on day-to-day basis in conjunction with the Warren County Director of Health and Director of Public Safety and Emergency Management; and
2. All County Offices are closed to the public and all County employees will continue to report to the workplace beginning on Tuesday, March 17, 2020 until further notice.

I hereby certify the above to be a true copy of a resolution adopted by the Board of Chosen Freeholders of the County of Warren on March 16, 2020.

Alex J. Lazorisak, Clerk of the Board

Recorded vote: Mr. Sarnoski yes, Mr. Kern yes, Mr. Gardner yes

“I think this is a necessary step. We need to be mobile, we need to be able to act quickly,” Mr. Sarnoski said. He thanked everyone for working together on this.

“Government has to go forward. We’re here to do that,” Freeholder Director Gardner said, expressing appreciation to department heads for their leadership.

“This is changing very, very fast,” Kern remarked as he commended the county’s employees, and cautioned this is only the beginning. “This is what public service is about, and they’re doing a great job,” he added.

CLOSING PUBLIC COMMENTS

Rob Colontelle, owner of LMR Disposal, expressed concerns about the ability to continue to service customers. He has 42 employees that he wanted to remain safe and healthy, and they may have to start earlier and work later than usual to achieve that. He thought some local ordinances may contradict that aim. Mr. Sarnoski thought he shouldn’t be concerned; that waste collection was considered an essential service. Such industries will do what is required to continue operating.

On a related note, Mr. Lazorisak said he had also reached out to the PCFAWC and Pequest River Municipal Utilities Authority, and they are putting plans in place to ensure things continue to operate.

County Clerk Holly Mackey, along with Board of Elections Administrator Bill Duffy, apprised the Board that the state has begun discussion regarding having June’s primary election conducted as 100 percent vote by mail. This would incur costs of at least an extra \$100,000 to the county. The costs of primary elections are normally borne by the municipalities. Should the primary be conducted in person, preparations will have to be made at the polling places (disinfectants, sanitizers, etc.) that will incur costs of perhaps up to \$10,000. Further, Mr. Duffy said poll workers would likely be scarce.

All parties acknowledged how everything was currently unfolding very rapidly. Ms. Mackey said late today, she was informed by the governor's office that all signatures for petitions for candidacy do not have to be submitted to her office until April 13, but she has to have the ballots ready by April 18. "They make these rules up, without any thought to how to it happens," she said.

Mr. Sarnoski said he intended to talk to the Economic Development Committee concerning accessing relief funds for small businesses. He said we are all focused on dealing with the same thing, the issue at hand. He thanked everyone for coming together, noting Dennis Riley's involvement. "We're asking people to do things that they've never done before," Mr. Sarnoski said, and commended everyone for their focus. "Whatever we can do to support, please let us know as soon as possible," urged Mr. Sarnoski, "Because we want to help."

Alluding to the recently introduced budget, he said we saved some funds for a rainy day, but we didn't expect the rainy day to come before we even passed the budget. "I'm really proud of everyone. Thank you," Mr. Sarnoski said.

Mr. Gardner expressed concern regarding library users. Library Director Maureen Wilkinson said they had stopped delivery to homebound, since nursing homes had already closed, and also ceased going to preschools. They are looking into mailing materials. Mr. Sarnoski made it clear that if library employees are needed to step in and help in other areas, they were expected to do so.

Habbie Bombase said she worked as an inspector for the NJ DEP Bureau of Solid Waste. She expressed concerns about contamination as inspections continue and facilities continue to operate. Mr. Summers said he thought that when we do have a situation of someone being quarantined, there were some guidelines for handling and disposing of household waste. It was still unclear how long the virus could live on various surfaces. Mr. Kern said he thought this was a good topic to raise on the next conference call with mayors once Mr. Summers could obtain more clarification.

There were no comments from the press.

On motion by Mr. Sarnoski, seconded by Mr. Kern, and there being no further business before the Board at this time, the meeting was adjourned at 8:19 p.m.