



Mayor Brindle's Opening Remarks March 24, 2020

Good evening, everyone, and thanks for joining us virtually tonight. It seems like a lifetime ago when we last met here just two weeks ago to swear in police officers and celebrate our local student athletes. In contrast, tonight's meeting is not open to members of the public, in order to comply with guidelines issued by the State Department of Health. I have the entire Town Council joining me by phone, and here in the room with me -- sitting very far from one another -- I have Chief Battiloro, Jim Gildea, Tara Rowley, Kim Forde, and Megan Avallone. If you wish to comment during the meeting, please email publiccomment@westfieldnj.gov, and be sure to include your name and address to have your email read publicly. For those who can't join us here on Facebook Live, the meeting will be replayed on our YouTube channel and TV 36.

As many of you know, I have been issuing daily COVID-19 updates through our Town Updates email list. If you are not subscribed, please visit westfieldnj.gov/townupdates. Tonight's comments here will also serve as my daily COVID-19 update.

CONFIRMED CASES

- As of today, there are 3,675 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey, the second-highest number of state cases in the country. These include three additional cases in Westfield -- two males (ages 48 and 20) and one female (age 41) -- all managing symptoms at home. This brings the official count from the Board of Health to 16 cases.
- I want to take a moment to recognize Megan Avallone, who not only oversees the Westfield Board of Health, but serves as the Regional Health Officer for eight municipalities in total. As you can imagine, the work involved in public health during a pandemic is, as an understatement, enormous. Megan's leadership, knowledge, and experience are tremendously valuable to us, and we are very lucky to have her. She will be giving some brief remarks in a few minutes to provide us with additional updates.

FEDERAL AND STATE UPDATES

- As a reminder, the deadline to file federal and state income taxes has been extended to July 15. In addition, the state has extended the deadline to file an appeal for property taxes from April 1 to May 1.
- Governor Murphy signed an order today allowing the following stores to open as essential retail stores: mobile phone retail and repair shops; bicycle shops, but only to provide service and repair; livestock feed stores; nurseries and garden centers; and farming equipment stores.

- The State has launched a jobs portal to help residents who have lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19 to find and apply for a new job at essential workplaces: <https://jobs.covid19.nj.gov/>
- State agencies have sent a letter to all municipal water utilities calling on them to voluntarily suspend all water shutoffs during COVID-19. Private utility providers have already voluntarily suspended shut-offs, and the expectation from the Governor is that all providers will follow suit.
- The State has applied for the available federal waiver to cancel all student standardized testing scheduled for April, with an expectation that the waiver will be granted and that it will not impact the graduation requirements of any student.
- The American Red Cross now faces a severe blood shortage due to an unprecedented number of blood drive cancellations during this coronavirus outbreak. Right now, eligible and healthy donors are strongly urged to make an appointment to provide lifesaving blood products to patients. For more information, visit: redcrossblood.org.

LOCAL UPDATES

- As I announced yesterday, the Police Department has set up a collection bin for unused N95 masks in their entry vestibule. Oftentimes, these masks come in packages of three or more, so please take a look to see if you have any leftover from a home renovation project. We will donate everything we receive to our first responders and the medical staff at Overlook.
- As a reminder, the Conservation Center is closed at this time. We are in the process of working on a plan that will allow us to open in a way that protects both residents and our DPW employees. The DPW is now working in staggered shifts for business continuity planning purposes, which means that we only have half the manpower at any given time, which does limit some of the work that can be performed. They continue to work on daily operations such as potholes, tree plantings and just last week, they assisted the WPD to transport and set up the concrete barriers for the Union County COVID-19 testing site at Kean. As we work through the safest way to operate the Conservation Center, we are cancelling the operating hours scheduled for this Saturday, and will communicate our plans to open in the near future.
- Now I want to remind you about social distancing and the Governor's stay at home order. Every day, I receive multiple messages from concerned residents about groups of kids congregating around town, neighborhood gatherings, and exercise classes being held in the park. The stay at home order means just that. Stay at home.
- Let me remind everyone again that the parks remain open for now, but we will close them if we reach a point when the risks outweigh the benefits to the community. As you know, the playgrounds and fields for organized play are closed, and the Board of Education also closed their recreational facilities, including Kehler. While the tennis courts are open, they should be used for singles only and certainly not for pickleball.

- Today, the State Health Commissioner said that 35% of the cases in New Jersey fall into the 30-49 age group, with 24% of those requiring hospitalization. Furthermore, it takes up to two weeks for people to show signs of illness. I know that a stay at home order is difficult, but it's essential to flatten the curve.
- In terms of grocery shopping, please limit your trips to as few as possible to mitigate crowding. A daily trip to the store is not essential, and violates the Governor's stay at home order.
- Another public service announcement that I need to make is to please not flush wipes of any kind, even those labeled flushable. Over the last three nights, the DPW -- already on scaled back crews -- had to address six separate residential sanitary sewer backups that unnecessarily cost us overtime. Just as we're saying the police should not have to patrol for social distancing measures, please don't put the DPW in the position of using their limited resources to address wholly avoidable and costly issues like these.
- Part of what makes us a community is not only the prioritized public health response to this crisis, but also how we help each other move forward. I am so heartened by the suggestions and the raised hands I see day after day, which really represent the very best of Westfield.
- We have our Virtual Rec Department continuing to build upon its schedule, the efforts of our Senior Advisory Council to keep our senior population informed and provided with services to assist them, and of course the #WeLoveLocal fund raising money to assist our independently owned businesses.
- We also continue to hear about other community building efforts that are happening organically-- cheering nightly at 8pm for our medical professionals, spirited displays of chalk art or window displays by kids, food donations to our first responders, and more. Please continue to share this information with us by tagging my social media accounts and the Town's as well, so that we can help spread the word for all of these efforts. And if you have any suggestions for our next Facebook Live porch performance, let me know! Activities like these to bring people together is more important than ever.
- I want to close by issuing some thanks. First, to the Town employees, who have shown flexibility and resilience as we continue to conduct the daily tasks of Town operations from a largely virtual workplace set up.
- Second, my thanks to the members of the Town Council for their hard work and commitment to being reliable liaisons to residents and businesses in addressing questions and building solutions.
- Lastly, thank you to the Westfield community -- our residents, business owners, and commercial property owners, and community organization leaders. We are lucky to have a community that is so engaged, concerned, and willing to help.

This is going to get worse before it gets better -- we know that from the experts, and I say that not to scare people but to be realistic about how we move forward balancing the municipal business at hand against the scale of an unprecedented situation. But I know from what I've seen so far that Westfield is able to get through this as a community.