

MARCH 15, 2020

What's changed? What's happening? And what's next? A guide to COVID-19's effect on Harrisonburg

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By Bridget Manley, Randi B. Hagi, Calvin Pynn and Ryan Alessi

Harrisonburg has one resident who is presumed to have COVID-19. Meanwhile, the public schools and universities are closed to students for the next couple weeks — at least. Employees at businesses and now JMU are being told to stay home if they can. The city has declared a state of emergency in order to apply for federal financial help to cover costs associated with managing the pandemic. And businesses already are feeling the pain of fewer customers and are bracing for that to get worse as area college students don't return to town.

Life in Harrisonburg — as it is in communities across the country and the world — is much different now than it was even a week ago. This guide offers context and the latest information about the city, health officials, schools and universities, businesses and bars and restaurants.

Update on "presumptive positive" Hburg patient

A Harrisonburg resident in their 60s was tested for COVID-19, and the results were a "presumptive positive" on Friday, according to the Virginia Department Health. That "presumptive positive" means that at least one sample tested positive for the COVID-19 virus as part of a test at a state or local laboratory and is awaiting confirmation from the Centers for Disease Control, according to the CDC. That official confirmation hadn't come in by Sunday.

In the meantime, public health officials aren't releasing information about the patient, that person's whereabouts before falling ill or who the person came in contact with.

"VDH does not disclose info that is specific to a patient, an incident or a case of illness, unless there is a need to do so to protect public health," Dr. Laura Kornegay, the Central Shenandoah Health District Director, said in a statement to The Citizen. "For any communicable illness that is reported to VDH, we assess a patient's symptoms and circumstances, including places the patient visited and people the patient contacted, and make the appropriate notifications and take the appropriate steps to limit the spread of illness. We do that every day."

Michael Parks, Harrisonburg's director of communications, said city officials also haven't received any additional notifications about where the patient might have gone.

"No, that information will not be shared with the city unless one of those facilities or individuals the patient may have come into contact with was a city facility or personnel," he said.

Kornegay said the patient's whereabouts aren't relevant because it doesn't change the steps people must take to protect themselves. She said everyone must practice social distancing and proper hygiene, such as thorough hand washing, not touching your face, and staying home if you're sick.

No other cases in Harrisonburg had been reported over the weekend.

What the city's declaration of a state of emergency means

In the wake of President Donald Trump declaring a national state of emergency on Friday, the Commonwealth of Virginia, Rockingham County and Harrisonburg (along with other localities) followed suit over the weekend.

Parks, the city spokesman, said the state of emergency allows the city to more easily divert money and receive federal funding faster.

For instance, he said if the city needs to pay staff for overtime related to COVID-19 responses or buy something, Harrisonburg can receive federal reimbursement faster.

"This is a common method governments use during extreme weather events, for example," he said. "We at this time do not have any expenditures planned and have not discussed a need to reallocate any resources."

The city has been planning for a few weeks for the novel coronavirus as it spread toward and into the United States, and officials have been reviewing protocols for infectious disease to make sure they were up to date, Parks said. Specifically, city officials are confident in procedures for first responders to handle calls, cleanliness of city facilities and the process for getting information to the public, he said.

Events are getting shut down ...

On Sunday, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam announced a ban on events involving 100 people or more and urged people to avoid other gatherings, including going to bars. However, Northam stopped short of measures in other states. For instance, Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker and Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine ordered bars and restaurants to shut down. DeWine's order took effect Sunday at 9 p.m. The Illinois shut-down begins Monday and will last at least through Monday, March 30.

Parks, the city spokesman, said city officials don't have the authority to shut down bars, restaurants or theaters. And the city won't shut down festivals or gatherings that aren't planned by the city government, he said.

However, the city has canceled permits for "mass outdoor social gathering" up to April 5. These permits typically cover events with 100 or more people and are often requested by JMU students.

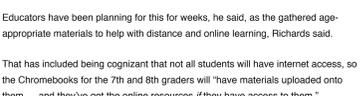
The CDC on Sunday night recommended cancelling events with 50 or more people for the next eight weeks.

The Citizen is keeping track of all the events, programs and activities cancelled or postponed.

... but public services will go on as planned

There will be no changes in how residents access city resources, such as trash collection, utility bill payments, police and fire and water, Parks said.

Some city employees will work from home, similar to protocol for snow days. Otherwise, city residents can expect no changes to how the city operates, he said.



School leaders are looking at closures beyond March 27

Harrisonburg's board, superintendent and top district officials and staff are already discussing the possibility of schools remaining closed for three weeks or more, even after Northam announced public schools should close through March 27.

"The governor did the right thing," Board Chairman Andy Kohen said. "I'm sure glad we have a governor who's a doctor."

The overriding principle is to keep people safe and prevent the spread of the virus.

"We are doing everything that we can to protect the health of our students and all of our staff," he said.

K-12 students will get instructional materials

Between Monday and Wednesday the public schools will distribute instructional materials to families, including Chromebooks to 7th and 8th graders, said Harrisonburg Superintendent Michael Richards.

Educators have been planning for this for weeks, he said, as the gathered age-appropriate materials to help with distance and online learning, Richards said.

That has included being cognizant that not all students will have internet access, so the Chromebooks for the 7th and 8th graders will "have materials uploaded onto them ... and they've got the online resources if they have access to them."

Younger children will receive packets with learning games and instructions in multiple languages. There will be online materials "if they want to use those," Richards added. "But it's very important that everybody has access [to education] during this time and not just those who have internet access," he said.

In addition, Comcast announced it will waive fees for low-income families who need internet access during these two weeks and up to 60 days in case the school closure is extended.

And even the distributional process will follow health protocols, Richards said. "We will practice social distancing while this is going on."

Students in the county schools also will have instructional packets and online activities, but the goal is not to advance in the curriculum, and these days won't count as school days, said Rockingham County Schools Superintendent Oskar Scheikl.

It's a "continuation of education opportunity for the students who have the packets or the internet." The districts will wait to hear from the state whether or not they must make up these days up at the end of the academic year.

"That's not really as important right now," Scheikl said. "First things first, let's make sure everyone's safe, let's make sure everyone eats, and then let's make sure kids have some educational materials."

Other city and county school services will continue ...

The Harrisonburg public schools' special education programs, counseling and other services will be "active" during this time, Richards said.

Richards said he will issue an in-depth message later this week to families and staff about what to expect later this week.

School lunch and nutrition programs will continue using the mobile cafe, said Andrea Early, executive director of school nutrition for the city schools.

Program staff and volunteers will hand out bagged meals at no cost to children ages 1-18, including two breakfasts and two dinners through a "drive-through" process at each school site and the mobile cafe sites beginning Tuesday.

"Every food bag is going to have two dinner meals and two breakfast meals, so it will carry families a little bit," she said.

There are no ID requirements, no pay requirements, and all children in the city are eligible, Early said.

In the meantime, the city schools custodial staffs will conduct a "deep cleaning" of school facilities over the next two weeks.

"These schools are going to be really clean at the end of it," Richards said.

In the county, school buildings are closed to everyone until Tuesday. "The longest known survival of the virus outside a host is 72 hours," so letting the buildings sit was important before starting the deep cleanings and before staff will begin coordinating the meals, Scheikl said.

There won't be any interruption in state funding or employee pay, Richards said. And the state is working on plans for the statewide Standards of Learning (SOL) testing windows.

And the school board postponed its Tuesday public meeting

The Harrisonburg City Public School board announced Tuesday evening it would postpone its work session, which was scheduled for Tuesday at 5:30 p.m. in the city council chambers.

The announcement said only that it would be rescheduled "soon."

The next meeting is crucial because the board must debate and approve the district's budget. And Board Chairman Andy Kohen said in an interview Friday it's important to stick to the schedule so the board can pass on a budget draft to city council for its approval.

"We need to keep things moving along the track," he said.

JMU encourages faculty and staff to work remotely

JMU and EMU, along with most other universities and colleges, announced last week they were canceling on-campus classes for students and moving courses online.

On Sunday evening, JMU's human resources department told employees to work from home, if possible.

"Effective immediately and for the near future, JMU faculty and staff are encouraged to work remotely if you are able to fulfill your job duties without being physically present on campus," the message to employees said. The message also said the university is looking into ways to help non-salaried and adjunct professors to continue getting paid if they end up missing time because of self-quarantine or sickness.

At JMU, instructors have this week to convert their courses to go online starting March 23 through at least April 5. The university plans to announce by March 27 whether to resume in-person classes on April 6 or beyond.

Our Community Place restricts access

The nonprofit Our Community Place, which provides services to people experiencing homelessness, is restricted only to essential volunteers and the organization's community members.

The organization announced on its website and in a Facebook post it is "implementing a partial quarantine of our facility in order to protect those who are at higher risk of serious illness or death from this virus."

The organization canceled a fundraiser scheduled for Saturday night and closed its Friday Lunch Restaurant until further notice.

"It is a painful decision for us to suspend these programs because they bring our community together in so many ways, and they are an important source of donation income to our organization, but our first priority is the safety of our community members," the message said.

One restaurant tries to cope by temporarily closing ...

Without the steady influx of JMU students as customers, Mr. Sato Express on Reservoir Street will close until at least April 1.

"But we have to see what is going on until April 1," said Vincent Zhao, owner of Mr. Sato Express. He said he might extend the closure.

"Business went down, and we have to protect our employees, too," he said. "Hope everybody stays safe."

... and last week's Taste of Downtown event took a hit

Andrea Dono, executive director of Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, said the Taste of Downtown event that highlighted more than 20 dozen local restaurants had a slower week that last year's event. The week ended Sunday, and Dono said Friday that the initial anecdotal evidence from the local businesses indicated traffic and money spent was down.

Several restaurants reported that the week started with solid numbers but as announcements about COVID-19-related closures started flooding in starting Wednesday, business began to taper off.

Ridwan Hotiman, owner and chef of Boboko Indonesian Cafe, said Friday that business was noticeably slower than normal Friday nights.

Molly Delaney, co-owner of The Little Grill Collective, said in a text that "Tuesday and Wednesday were surprisingly busy for us. Thursday felt normal, and Friday was definitely slower."

That slow-down extended into the weekend, she said in a text Sunday, as some regulars stayed home.

"We experienced a waitlist for part of Sunday (it's not unusual to be on a waitlist almost all day Saturday). Some locals were enjoying our faster wait times," she said.



And other bars and restaurants try to keep their footing

Paul Somers, owner of The Golden Pony, said the crowds late last week had more of a "snow day effect" attitude.

"These folks seemed to want to get some last bangs in the etc. and gauge the level of alarm with others," he said.

But he said it's been difficult to watch events and shows keep getting canceled and "months and months of work ... getting washed away as if by a tidal wave."

"This was definitely set to be our best spring ever for concerts," he said in an email. "These are very volatile times and it's harrowing, but personally, I think everyone at The Pony is still in shock and not fully recognizing what this will mean for all of us. It's scary. We are pretty much banking on closing at some point as a result of all this but wanting to remain open for folks that want to eat, drink or meet with small groups."

Somers said The Pony is trying to limit its capacity, according to Northam's orders. And take out orders are increasing as more people stay home.

The Pony posted on Facebook that while it's open now, it will be updating the site as developments occur.

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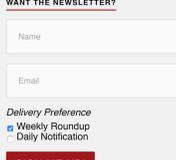
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