



## ELECTION 2020: MARTINSVILLE CITY COUNCIL Q&A » PAGE 7

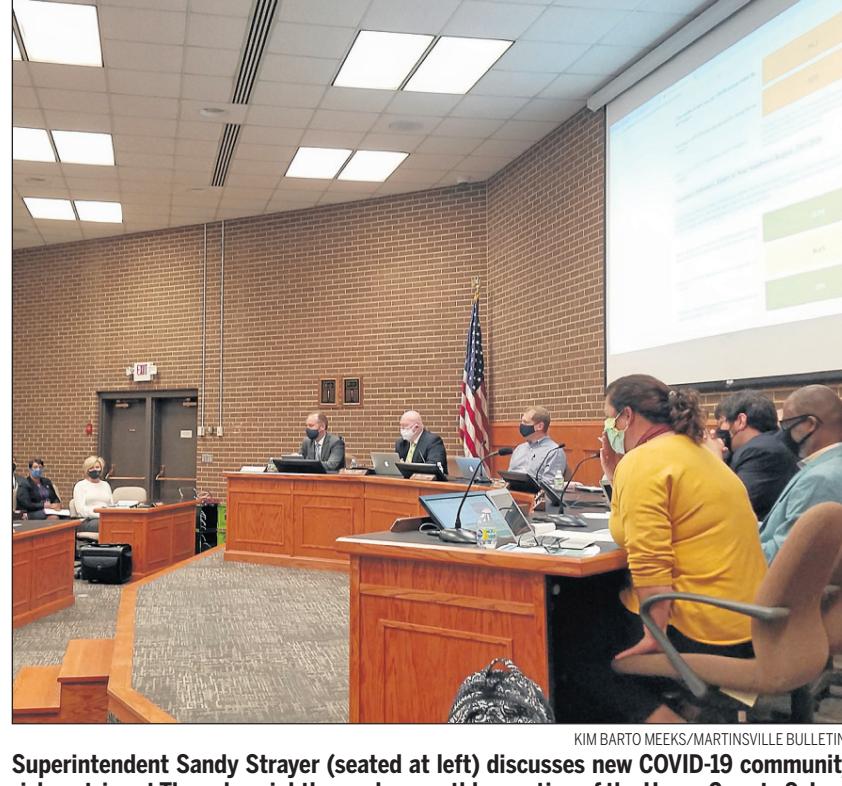


## SPEEDWAY: CLAY CAMPBELL TALKS 2021 SCHEDULE » SPORTS

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

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Superintendent Sandy Strayer (seated at left) discusses new COVID-19 community risk metrics at Thursday night's regular monthly meeting of the Henry County School Board.

KIM BARTO MEEKS/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

## Teachers, data don't sway board

Despite pleas from several teachers about various factors involving the coronavirus, the Henry County School Board's plan to reopen on Oct. 12 remains in place.

By Kim Barto Meeks  
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The Henry County School Board is sticking by its decision to resume in-person classes on a limited basis starting Oct. 12, even as teachers once turned out in force at Thursday

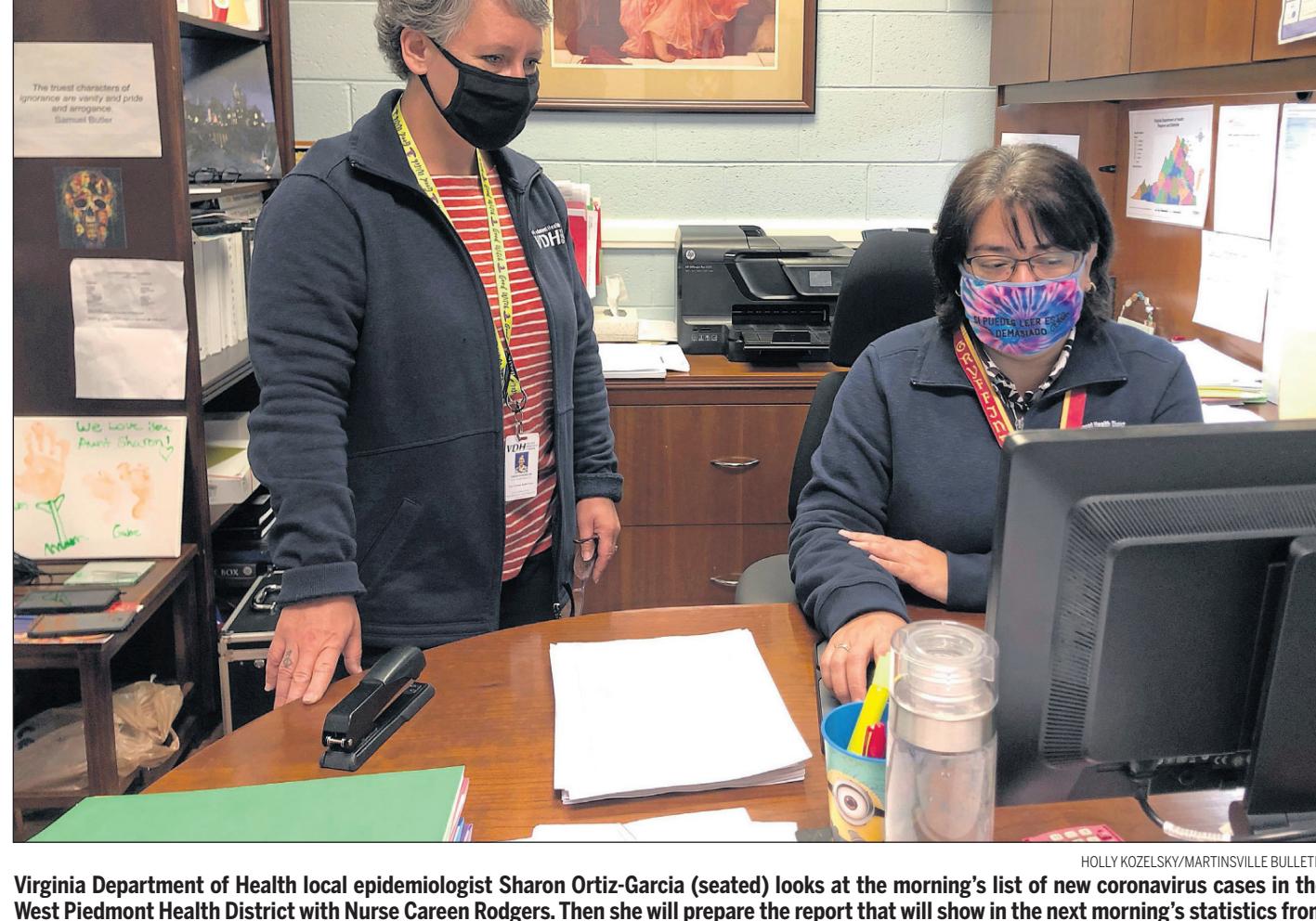
night's monthly school board meeting in opposition to the plan.

Several teachers and representatives of the Henry County Education Association addressed the board with concerns about students' returning to school on the hybrid schedule. Many of their colleagues sat in the socially distanced audience and applauded in solidarity.

The scene was similar to the school board's heavily attended special meeting the week before. On Sept. 24, the board voted, 5-2, to move from fully remote instruction to the hybrid plan, with masks required indoors for all students and staff.

SEE BOARD | A10

## The disease detective



Virginia Department of Health local epidemiologist Sharon Ortiz-Garcia (seated) looks at the morning's list of new coronavirus cases in the West Piedmont Health District with Nurse Careen Rodgers. Then she will prepare the report that will show in the next morning's statistics from the VDH, and start the contact-tracing process.

HOLLY KOZELSKY/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Meet Sharon Ortiz-Garcia, the epidemiologist in the area who traces "the when, the what and the how, and where" of the coronavirus' travels. Like is going on in Washington right now.

By Holly Kozelsky  
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**S**ince the first positive coronavirus case hit the West Piedmont Health District on March 20, a detective of sorts has been on the case, assigned to trace every element of how the virus came to find that individual and how it might be spreading in the area.

Sharon Ortiz-Garcia is by training epidemiologist, an expert in contagions, but more effectively you can consider her the leading inves-

tigator of the spread of COVID-19 in Martinsville and Henry, Patrick, and Franklin counties, which comprise the West Piedmont Health District. This has become no small task.

In a typical day, she receives reports of all new COVID-positive patients in the district, and her job is to follow up with every one of them, offering instructions for quarantine, managing the illness and — perhaps most importantly — obtaining

SEE VIRUS | A10

### Three more deaths in health district

Three more residents of the West Piedmont Health District have died from COVID-19. That's now 76 since the pandemic began in March. There were also 52 new cases on Saturday as reported by the Virginia Department of Health.

More information, Page A3

## Trump looking better'

President said to be improving, but next 48 hours 'critical.'

By Jonathan Lemire,  
Jill Colvin and Zeke Miller  
*The Associated Press*

BETHESDA, Md. — President Donald Trump went through a "very concerning" period Friday and faces a "critical" next two days in his fight against COVID-19 at a military hospital, his chief of staff said Saturday — in contrast to a rosier assessment moments earlier by Trump doctors, who took pains not to reveal the president had received supplemental oxygen at the White House before his hospital admission.

"We're still not on a clear path yet to a full recovery," White House chief of staff Mark Meadows said outside the Walter Reed

SEE TRUMP | A10



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Dr. Sean Conley, physician to President Donald Trump, briefs reporters at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., on Saturday.

### INDEX

Accent	B10	Crossword	B12	Opinion	A4
Calendar	A2	Lottery	A2	Sports	B1
Classified	B13	Nation	A9		
Comics	B11	Obituaries	A5		



### WEATHER

Intervals of sun and clouds, turning mostly cloudy into the evening.

For detailed weather information, see Page A2

HOLLY KOZELSKY: The late Alexis Lee did democracy the right way.

Page B10



# Trump

From Page A1

National Military Medical Center.

The changing, and at times contradictory accounts, created a credibility crisis for the White House at a crucial moment, with the president's health and the nation's leadership on the line. With Trump ex-

pected to remain hospitalized several more days and the presidential election looming, his condition is being anxiously watched by Americans.

Moreover, the president's health represents a national security issue of paramount importance not only to the functions of the U.S. government but to countries around the world, friendly and otherwise.

Saturday's briefing by

Navy Commander Dr. Sean Conley and other doctors raised more questions than it answered. Conley repeatedly refused to say whether the president ever needed supplemental oxygen, despite repeated questioning, and declined to share key details including how high a fever Trump had been running before it came back down to a normal range. Conley also revealed that

Trump had begun exhibit-

ing "clinical indications" of COVID-19 on Thursday afternoon, earlier than previously known. Conley spent much of the briefing dodging reporters' questions, as he was pressed for details.

"Thursday no oxygen. None at this moment. And yesterday with the team, while we were all here, he was not on oxygen," Conley said.

But according to a person

familiar with Trump's con-

dition, Trump was administered oxygen at the White House on Friday morning, well before he was transported to the military hospital by helicopter that evening. The person was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to The Associated Press only on condition of anonymity.

Conley said that Trump's symptoms, including a mild cough, nasal congestion and fatigue "are now resolv-

ing and improving" and said the president had been fever-free for 24 hours. But Trump also is taking aspirin, which lowers body temperature and could mask or mitigate that symptom.

"He's in exceptionally good spirits," said another doctor, Sean Dooley, who said Trump's heart, kidney, and liver functions were normal and that he was not having trouble breathing or walking around.

# Board

From Page A1

School board members took no action Thursday to amend their previous vote. However, discussion of the return to school plan dominated much of the meeting's agenda.

Under the hybrid plan, students would attend classes in-person two days a week and learn remotely the other three days. Parents can also choose to have their children continue 100% virtual classes.

Virtual learning "will have the same quality as in-person learning," Superintendent Sandy Strayer told the board.

Strayer said families would be contacted Friday with their child's schedule. They will have until Tuesday to change their learning preference.

Some already have switched their children from in-person to remote learning since the school board announced Oct. 12 as the start of the hybrid plan. At the special school board meeting Sept. 24, Strayer said survey results showed 3,530 students had chosen in-person, and 1,466 students planned to stay virtual.

By Thursday night, however, "we are fastly approaching almost 2,000 virtual learners," Strayer said.

In terms of total student population, "we're not quite at 7,000 any more, so we have 5,000 divided by half coming every day to the schools. There could be more students choosing virtual once they see the options that they have," she said.

## Weighing the risks

Strayer defended the decision to bring students back to school buildings in the face of new COVID-19 metrics released Monday by the Virginia Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On the day of the meeting, the VDH dashboard placed Henry County in the second-highest risk category, "higher risk," for community spread of the virus.

"We did investigate the new metric to determine if we need to reconsider our opening for October 12, and at this time I do feel we should continue our return to school plan on October 12," Strayer told the board.

She added that school officials have been constantly monitoring local COVID-19 numbers for months. "You cannot look at one indicator in isolation," she said.

The VDH/CDC metrics rate COVID-19 risk levels for individual cities and counties in Virginia on a scale of lowest risk, lower risk, moderate risk, higher risk, and highest risk. This assessment is mainly based on two statistics known as "core indicators": the number of new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 14 days and percentage of positive tests during the same time period.

As of Thursday, Henry County had 192.3 new cases per 100,000 and 9.7% positive tests within the past 14 days. These numbers appeared orange on the online dashboard, meaning they are in the higher risk category.

The CDC recommends using these main indicators, as well as considering the school's ability to implement key health guidelines such as "consistent and correct use of masks, social distancing to the extent possible, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, cleaning and disinfection, and contact tracing in collaboration with local health department."

During the meeting, Strayer showed the online dashboard to board members but emphasized the positive trends in

some of the other figures.

"The trend is the most important piece," she said. "We are declining in percent change in new cases per 100,000 population during the past seven days compared with the previous seven days."

This rate was -11.5% as of Thursday, and it appeared green on the VDH dashboard, meaning "lowest risk."

However, this number is a "secondary indicator," not one of the "core indicators" on the CDC scale. The website states, "These secondary indicators should not be used as the main criteria for determining the risk of disease transmission in schools. They should be used to support decision-making derived from the core indicators."

Strayer said she wanted to restate a point she made at the previous meeting, telling the board, "We have had cases of COVID-19 in our schools, and we most likely will continue to have cases. The point is to stop cases from spreading."

## Questions about safety

Bassett High School teacher Kathryn Adkins pointed to the CDC's numbers as a sign that it's not safe for students to return. She was one of six teachers to address the board during the public comment period.

Adkins, who serves as vice president of the Henry County Education Association, urged the board to set a policy "in which students do not return to the building until the rate of new cases reaches a moderate risk level of less than 50 cases."

Another speaker, Career Academy teacher and HCEA representative Jerry Byrd, said many teachers are worried about cleaning and sanitation taking place in school buildings.

"Teachers are scared," Byrd said. "We need to make sure teachers feel safe in their buildings. They don't feel that way right now."

Amanda Johnson, the librarian at MeadowView Elementary School, said she is concerned about the potential spread of the virus as she teaches and interacts with more than 600 students.

"Knowing that I can't visit my mother who is dying of cancer without being the one to put her in the ground sooner is weighing on me," Johnson said. "It is time to re-evaluate our current plan, as the number of cases in Henry County is still alarming."

Melanie Reynolds, an English teacher at Bassett High School and mother of two county students, said she is "a proud breast cancer survivor."

"I love my students. Like every other teacher in this county, I want them in my classroom more than you could ever imagine," Reynolds said. "As teachers, we give everything we have to our kids. But there are many of us at high risk of catching this virus, and we have students at risk as well."

Heather Byrd spoke as a teacher, parent, and HCEA representative about the "overwhelming" expectations for school employees under the hybrid plan.

"Staff members are expected to be in two places at one time," Byrd said.

For example, at the high school level, teachers are expected to monitor the hallways as students change classes while also sanitizing all the desks between class periods. "That is not possible," she said.

## Rushed decision?

Byrd also spoke about the health and safety of bus drivers.

One driver is "very concerned about temperature checks not occurring before

children get on the bus, which means they're going to be transporting sick children, possibly COVID students on the bus," she said.

Drivers are also concerned about "the impossibility of making sure children keep masks on while riding the bus" and "keeping children separated" to meet social distancing guidelines, she said.

Melanie Eggleston, a teacher at Campbell Court Elementary School, said, "I feel as though the decision to begin the hybrid schedule was rushed into."

Eggleston suggested the board look at dedicating some teachers to virtual instruction and others to teaching in-person, instead of asking teachers to do both. Or, shortening the school day would be another option to give teachers time for planning, collaboration and working with virtual learners.

Under the current plan, "we simply don't have enough hours in our current schedule to adequately and equitably educate all learners," she said.

Parent Myndi Mullins said she has three children in the county schools, in kindergarten, second and third grades. She praised her children's teachers for being available during virtual learning.

"Unless my teachers are in a meeting, within five minutes, they're there," Mullins said. "They're on it, paying one-on-one attention."

However, she questioned how teachers will juggle all of their responsibilities during the hybrid schedule.

"My teachers are tired. They have been there for us since day one," Mullins told the board. "You're putting too much on their shoulders with hybrid."

## Finding answers

School Board members Benjamin Gravely and Teddy Martin II were the only two to vote against returning on the hybrid plan Oct. 12.

On Thursday, Martin cautioned against deciding to take risks based on daily figures from the VDH.

"You cannot count on the VDH day-by-day statistics because if you did, you'd have the impression it's just like Chick-fil-A—you can't get it on a Sunday," he said. "These statistics are lagging indicators."

Martin also expressed concerns about hospitals' having enough capacity once they are faced with both flu season and COVID-19.

"Just like on 'Game of Thrones,' winter is coming," he said.

He also asked Strayer how school officials plan to respond to teacher and frontline staff who have "come here with very real concerns. ...The last thing I want to happen is for people to take the time to come here and feel like we did not listen to what they have to say."

Strayer said she has been taking notes on all the teacher comments and plans to work on a response to go out.

"Every question that's brought up, we want to address. We want to make sure principals meet with their staff and reassure them," she said.

Strayer noted there is a Frequently Asked Questions page on the Henry County Public Schools website. Many of the questions from parents, students and staff can also be answered by the district's COVID-19 instruction plan and health plan for returning to school, which have been posted online since July at [www.henry.k12.va.us](http://www.henry.k12.va.us).

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# Virus

From Page A1

the names and contact information for anyone who has been in "close contact" with the infected person.

"It has been non-stop seven days a week," she said.

As many experts today are trying to trace the outbreak of the virus that has infected President Trump, his wife, Melania, and various others in government, they are turning to experts such as Ortiz-Garcia.

In the beginning, Ortiz-Garcia did this by herself. But as the numbers of cases grew, nurse Careen Rodgers began helping, and then many of the staff of the health departments in the West Piedmont District were trained to assist with the effort. Now, nearly two dozen people have been hired in the district to help manage the pandemic and minimize further spread beyond the more than 2,100 individuals who already have been infected. The work goes on seven days a week.

On a district level, Ortiz-Garcia said, epidemiologists "are basically considered the experts of controlling and preventing communicable diseases ... that have to be reported by health care providers and other entities."

That is achieved by her determining "the when, the what and the how, and where" infected people have been, she said. "My job, working with the community at large, is to make sure we have prevention and control measures."

Those measures are the best that can be done to protect people, Ortiz-Garcia said, "until we can find a vaccine."

## Tracking the suspects

The additional personnel are serving mostly as contact tracers and case managers. Coronavirus tracking begins as soon as the health department receives notices of positive cases from health care providers, testing centers and other entities.

"We start assigning the cases to the contracted case investigators that we have now," Ortiz-Garcia said. Those case investigators, generally, manage several contact tracers. The tracers are charged with reaching out to every person who is considered a close contact. The investigators also ask the patient what he/she has done over the 14-day period before they tested positive. This includes who the patient has been around and where the patient has traveled.

"One of the main critical questions is when the symptoms started," Ortiz-Garcia said. That's because contact tracing begins with identifying the patient the patient had been in contact with during those two days before the onset of the symptoms, not the entire 14 days. The contact tracer tells those people that they had been near someone with the coronavirus.

The need to know with whom the patient had been in contact with during those two weeks before the positive test results is to figure out where the patient may have caught it, she said.

Anyone who has tested positive for the coronavirus, whether they develop COVID-19 symptoms or not, must remain isolated until the health department releases him or her. The virus can be spread by asymptomatic people as well as those who are visibly sick.

Being in a small health district is stressful during the pandemic, Ortiz-Garcia said. "It is better now, but when the numbers rise and manpower is low, that puts a lot of stress on us."

"In the beginning, it was stressful," she said. "We were overwhelmed." The hiring of additional staff has enabled public health workers to ease back into their regular jobs.

Ortiz-Garcia, who is from Puerto Rico, has been an employee of the health department since 2006. She was hired as a food safety inspector before moving into her role as district epidemiologist, and wasted no time jumping right in. Two weeks after she started, a fungal meningitis outbreak hit the area, and it was up to her to investigate it.

## Masks and stuff

Even as COVID cases continue to be reported, diseases that district epidemiologists usually deal with include salmonella, various tick-borne diseases and norovirus, as well as outbreaks, but not individual cases of flu, she said.

Several health districts share the services of one epidemiologist whose specialty is sexually transmitted diseases, she said.

Her advice on protecting self and others against the coronavirus is nothing new, but supremely important: "Wearing a mask is critical. I wear a mask because I want to protect my family and coworkers." Social distancing also is crucial.

The sooner "we come together as a community," she said, "the quicker we put a stop" to the pandemic's reach, and the suffering it causes.

Holly Kozelsky is a writer for the Martinsville Bulletin; contact her at 276-638-8801 ext. 243.