

COVID19 Update with the Board of Commissioners

The Graham County Board of Commissioners met for a teleconference meeting on Tuesday, March 25, 2020 to discuss the COVID19 issues that have been developing. All board was present. Also present was: Manager Garland, Attorney Jay Coward, Health Director Beth Booth, Health Nursing Supervisor Lorita Eller, Sheriff Jones and EM Management Director Larry Hembree, Town of Lake Santeetlah Administrator Kim Matheson, Town of Robbinsville Mayor Steve Hooper, Appalachian Community Health Center Administrator Tina Lee, Town of Fontana Dam Administrator Zelerie Rogers and Mayor Rob Hardy, Graham County School Superintendent Angela Knight, USFS Ranger Andy Gaston, 911 Director Misty Hembree, Graham Star Editor Kevin Hensley, and Graham County Projects Manager Jason Marino.

1. Chairman Wiggins called the meeting to order.
2. Chairman Wiggins thanked the committee for their time and stated that he would be discussing more on the road closures and was thankful that Swain County Commissioner Ben Bushyhead was being supportive on the closure at Deal's Gap.
3. Chairman Wiggins stated that he is open to suggestions on the campgrounds with the out of state folks coming into the county and on the rentals that are continuing to rent for one month or less.
4. Manager Garland stated that the permitting has begun and we had over (100) people applied since yesterday. Manager Garland stated that we had a glitch with our emails and she is trying to get this rectified.
5. Sheriff Jones stated that he will be supplying one officer for the checkpoints and they will be rotating every (4) hours.
6. Manager Garland stated that the COVID19 Website is up and they are posting up to date notices on the page as they are received. Manager Garland stated that she did need direction on some of the permit requests, immediate family, best friend, fiancée, who is allowed to come in with the homeowner.
7. Commissioner Orr stated that if someone gives care to their parents and this is proven they should be allowed to come in for this purpose. Chairman Wiggins stated that the detour is still going to be an issue for us as far as traffic control but once this is closed we will have better control. Manager Garland stated that she had a call from a man that lives in Tipton but his driveway is on the Graham County side and was concerned about the permit. Chairman Wiggins stated that some of these issues are common sense issues but he is not against the board developing a plan to use.
8. Kim Matheson with the Town of Lake Santeetlah stated that a homeowner called today they want to send their kids and grandkids to their home. Manager Garland stated that the standing guidelines are homeowner, spouse, and children of lineal descent with a birth certificate for proof. Manager Garland stated that if you were not the homeowner the permit would be denied.
9. Manager Garland stated that she needs clarification to tell these homeowners. Manager Garland stated for her to refer them to the Graham County website and see COVID19.
10. Tina Lee stated that the issue for her is persons needing to get to the clinic for appointments. Ms. Lee stated that they are offering Telehealth to their patients and telephone visits but they still need to come into Town to get their medications.
11. Chairman Wiggins stated that the Tipton checkpoint is the last one to be put together due to the detour so if they are coming from that direction they will just need to have a note or letter from the doctor stating that they do have a doctor's appointment that day.
12. Ms. Lee asks is she needs to request a permit for her workers that live out of town and the answer was yes. Ms. Lee stated that a deputy needed to be at these checkpoints because people are not happy and she is afraid the people at the checkpoints could get hurt. Ms. Lee stated that she understands the checkpoints but the board needed to really think about this and be certain and educate the people on the virus. Ms. Lee stated that most of us will survive the illness but these roadblocks will make people very angry.
13. Chairman Wiggins stated that the CDC has recommended the everyone stay home and other counties are putting a Shelter in Place for their county. Chairman Wiggins stated that Buncombe County has one already in place. Chairman Wiggins stated that he did not want to disrupt

anyone lives more than we have to but this is a reality all around us and we are trying to do what we can to keep our residents safe.

14. Attorney Coward stated that he has been researching and word is that the Governor will be declaring a Shelter in Place for North Carolina. Attorney Coward stated that California who has forty million people has issued one. Attorney Coward stated that there will be emergency allowances and these will be determined on a case-by-case basis.
15. Manager Garland stated that we do not have high tech resources and worries about the permits being photocopied.
16. Chairman Wiggins stated that this is new territory for us and if a Shelter in Place is needed to keep Graham County Citizens safe then we may have to go that way. Chairman Wiggins stated that if we didn't do something we were going to be overrun because at last count 1000 people had come into this county from out of state plus 100 motorcycles. Chairman Wiggins stated that if we do not close it they would keep coming. Chairman Wiggins stated that the more we minimize the chances of risk are less and we have issues regarding our population of elderly and sick folks in our county.
17. Zelerie Rogers asks how long the detour will last.
18. Manager Garland stated that they are educating the people as best we can but wanted to know if we should do a Facebook Live so that people can see a person instead of just the updates. Manager Garland stated that this is more for our locals to tamp down their fears.
19. Sheriff Jones stated that his staff is now working seven days a week and will work the checkpoints for safety and security. Sheriff Jones stated that his staff will rotate every four hours and he has enough to man three checkpoints. Sheriff Jones stated that he received additional PPE's from Haywood County and we will see how things go.
20. Tina Lee stated that if the county does issue a Shelter in Place will this allow people to go to work only and how do you prevent others from coming into the county from other states. Manager Garland stated that this is the reason for the permits and there is a high level of anxiety. Ms. Lee stated that the permitting would make the people all the more anxious and some do not like it and are getting upset. Chairman Wiggins stated that his main concern is the citizens and keeping people other than workers from going out and in. Ms. Rogers stated that she is sure people can go if they have family dying or picking up their kids with shared custody.
21. Manager Garland stated that people are not ready for this but she is doing all that she can to get the word out. Manager Garland stated that she has to keep up with Beth Booth, Health Director to make sure that they are not posting ahead of each other.
22. Commissioner Orr stated that many people do not have access to internet and we need another way to get the information out and suggested radio or mailers. Beth Booth stated that Stecoah has access to a radio station and they are happy to help us. Manager Garland stated that she was unsure on the Murphy station but she would try to find out. Commissioner Orr stated that there is radio coverage in Macon County and we get a lot of feedback from Haywood and Cherokee Counties as well.
23. Graham Star Editor Kevin Hensley stated that he would be glad to do a FAQ in the paper that people could cut out that want to ask questions to the board. Mr. Hensley stated that he would be willing to do a livestream and it could help reach some people or develop a hot line.
24. Chairman Wiggins stated that the school has an all call and stated that this could be done as well. Angela Knight, School Superintendent stated that they could help with that and Commissioner Orr stated that most churches have the all call as well. Commissioner Orr stated that we could prepare a recorded message to use to get out to all the systems.
25. Chairman Wiggins stated that many citizens do not have internet but they do have a landline and we could announce this with a prerecorded message. Clerk Crisp suggested that a flyer be prepared to send with the meals that are being taken by the school and the senior center.
26. Commissioner Cody stated that his company is issuing ID Cards so his employees can travel between counties and stated that he would get a list of names on their letterhead to Manager Garland for those employees coming from Graham County to Macon County.
27. Manager Garland stated that the stickers would make it easier for the checkpoints to send the cars straight through.
28. Jason Marino, Project Manager stated that he has worked with the Sheriff on where the check points will be located and we will have them at Cherohala Skyway, Topton, Tsali and in the Deals Gap Area. Mr. Marino stated that he is working with quotes on pricing for signage and manual help for the sites. Mr. Marino stated that the Cherohala Skyway would have signs in place immediately with a deadline closure. Mr. Marino stated that Deals Gap would have to allow some through traffic for persons that work or go to the doctor in Tennessee but hopefully their company will provide them with ID's. Ranger Andy Gaston asks where the closure will be located

at in Tsali. Mr. Marino stated that closure will be at the county line slightly above the Tsali Road and signage will be placed in the straightaway by NCDOT standards.

29. Manager Garland stated that she is logistically looking for the checkpoints to be operational by noon Friday or 5:00 p.m.
30. Chairman Wiggins wanted Tennessee notified of the closure right away and wanted Deals Gap and the Cherohala closed by Friday. Mr. Marino stated that they are still working out the logistics for the Tsali and Topton closures due to the detour.
31. Chairman Wiggins stated that this would send out a good consistent message that we are serious.
32. EM Director Larry Hembree stated that we needed to give allowances to the people that have an Almond address at the Tsali checkpoint because from Wolf Creek Grocery on they use an Almond address and not a Robbinsville one. Manager Garland stated that the man in Topton is in the same condition and they just need to show their driver's license.
33. Mr. Marino stated that he will continue to prepare for the check points
34. Director Beth Booth stated that they just learned that they no longer are required to be notified of testing at the medical facilities unless the test comes back positive. Director Booth stated that she has received several calls that some people are under isolation but the health department did not know that and was unsure why they did not know that.
35. Ranger Gaston stated that they are taking standard calls at the office with no public access and wanted to discuss the roads and make sure that the board wanted the gated roads to remain closed. Ranger Gaston stated that it was ramp time and turkey season and people will want to be here for overnight camping. Chairman Wiggins stated no they did not want the roads opened nor will they allow for overnight camping. Ranger Gaston stated that there are many hikers on the Appalachian Trail and they are trying to get the word out that Graham County is closed down so they would not have a place to stay in Robbinsville. Ranger Gaston stated that the majority of hikers would be getting off at the NOC. Ranger Gaston asks about the Cherohala on the Tennessee side. Mr. Marino stated that he has been coordinating with Tennessee to close the road at the state line intersection. Ranger Gaston stated that if this site was not manned they would move the barriers and come on through. Sheriff Jones stated that he would do the best that he could but he did not have enough staff to man more sites than three. Ranger Gaston stated that the Forest Service could not patrol or manage the campsites around the lake.
36. Chairman Wiggins stated that he has some ideas on that and would get with Sheriff Jones to deal with that issue. Chairman Wiggins stated that we might need to move the Cherohala closure to the Beech Gap where the gravel road is located that goes into Tennessee. Mr. Marino stated that the closure would be at the Beech Gap. Sheriff Jones stated that he would be glad to check this site a couple of times a day. Ranger Gaston stated that they would do what they can but they only had one officer. Chairman Wiggins stated that we would get through and he appreciated everyone's support.
37. Chairman Wiggins requested that we have a routine call every other day at 12:00 noon. Commissioner Orr agreed that this would give everyone a chance to hear the day's information. Chairman Wiggins stated that we would continue this meeting to Friday, March 27th at noon. The board all agreed.

Dale Wiggins, Chairman

Lynn Cody, Vice-Chairman

Keith Eller, Member

Jacob Nelms, Member

Connie Orr, Member

ATTEST: _____
Kim Crisp, Clerk to the Board