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Michael J. Sullivan
Town Administrator

Town Administrator’s Report to the Selectboard for July 14, 2020

Honorable Selectboard,

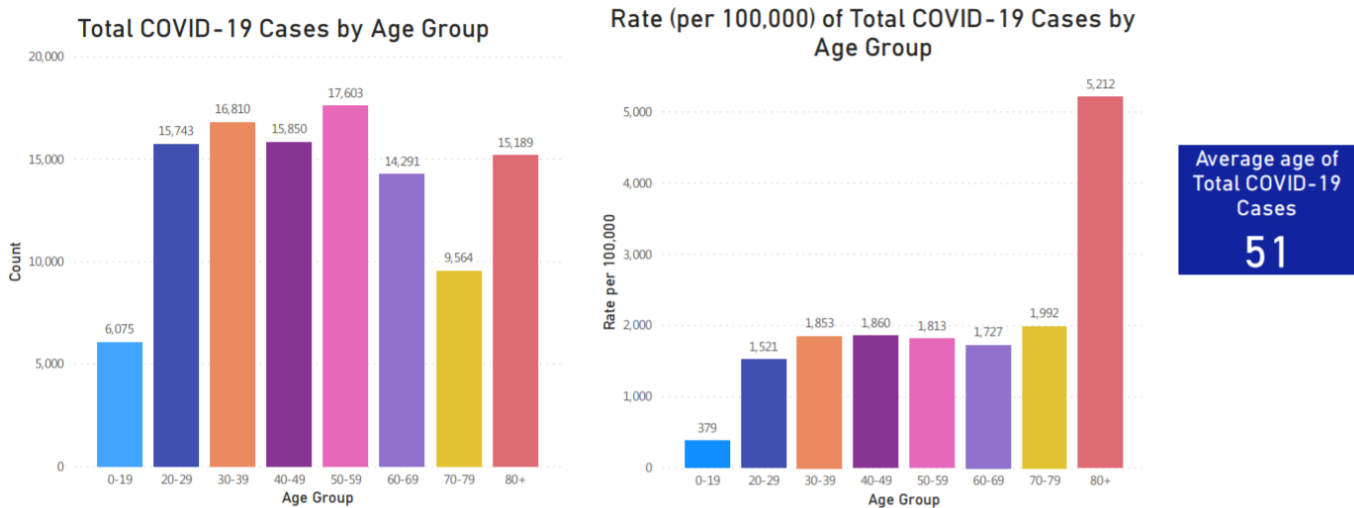
Please consider and review the information presented in this report. Thank you for your attention, patience, and leadership!

COVID 19 Pandemic



Massachusetts Department of Public Health COVID-19 Dashboard - Saturday, July 11, 2020

Cases and Case Rate by Age Group



The “Stop the Spread” governor’s initiative on asymptomatic testing has been strengthened and the importance of “Answering the Call” will become more important as we continue through this state of emergency. As has been reported, South Hadley has had 23 confirmed deaths from COVID 19 since the reporting started in March. The town has been hovering around 290 active cases for several weeks. Presently South Hadley accounts for just under 30% of all cases in Hampshire County according to the Commonwealth’s reporting system, MAVEN.

The state has really done an incredible job creating guidelines and messaging. Governor Baker has been cited by many nationally for guiding Massachusetts in some very difficult waters. We certainly have

benefited by being a state with incredible research and a trove of experts in the fields of medicine. However, the greatest asset in the fight against this disease, once history is written, is the ability for this state and places like South Hadley to follow the guidelines, use face coverings when appropriate, maintain social distancing, wash hands thoroughly and frequently, avoid crowds, avoid loud crowds even more and all the other sensible guidelines that will help us survive.

As I have cited before, more people will likely die from COVID 19 in South Hadley than will die from lightning strikes (average 27 annually) in the entire United States in 2020. Everyone knows to take cover when in a thunder storm. If we can continue to adopt a commonsense approach in South Hadley, Hampshire County, Western Mass, the entire state and nation, we will survive this. If we ignore it we may wish we were struck by lightning. Here is the update for South Hadley from the state.

Disease	Status	Num of Cases
Novel Coronavirus	CONFIRMED	150
Novel Coronavirus	CONTACT	135
Novel Coronavirus	PROBABLE	7
Novel Coronavirus	SUSPECT	2

Here are a couple of links which may help you better understand the enormity of this plague;
<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-response-reporting>
<https://southhadley.org/1026/COVID-19-RESPONSE>

South Hadley Voter Outreach



The town clerk, Board of Registrars and a group of volunteers have been painstakingly getting the word out about early voting. With a State Primary Election coming up on Sept. 1 and a Presidential Election to follow soon after on Nov. 3, the “team” has been dedicated to getting the message about voting and at the same time planning to make it all the safest process for all citizens in a COVID-19 environment.

The last day to register to vote for the State Primary is Aug. 12. The last day to register for the Presidential Election will Oct. 14. The “September Primary In-Person Early Voting” is slated to take place beginning Saturday Aug. 22 through Friday Aug. 28 in the Community Room of the South Hadley Public Library. The “November Election In-person Early Voting” will start in South Hadley Oct. 19 and end on Oct. 30 also at the library. The schedule of times and safety protocols will be posted on the clerk’s page of the town website.



Town hall is simply not suitable considering the pandemic guidelines and other challenges. The “In-Person Voting” facility must have suitable parking, be accessible for all, have a

MEET, SUITE 109, SOUTH HADLEY, MASSACHUSETTS 01075-2896

designated entrance and exit, and be unhindered by other public activities during the in-person voting. The library can accommodate all of these needs.

The team will also be working on some detailed controls which may include having people remain in their cars while the capacity adjusts, possibly temperature checks, mandatory face covering, available and continuous sanitizing.

There has been a great deal of national discussion on “mail-in” voting. This has been commonplace for many in South Hadley and is often referred to as “absentee ballots.” This tried-and-true form of voting is safe, avoids long waits at the polls and I can assure you the clerk’s office is diligent on making sure every vote delivered is counted. We are working out a drop off system which is secure and will allow people to confidently drop off their ballots in a lock box at town hall.

It goes without saying we want everyone to vote - safely - and I am confident the town clerk and her team will do everything possible to make that happen! Here are some links to websites which may provide you with more information regarding voting this fall.

<https://www.southhadley.org/620/Elections>

<https://www.usa.gov/voting>

<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleidx.htm>

Transfer Station/Recycling/Compost/Trash



The Transfer Station operation is now open five days a week and, as users are aware, with significant necessary changes to the process and policies. I encourage all residents to review information available at the following link

<https://www.southhadley.org/241/Solid-Waste-Division> to understand the policies and access information. I believe everyone understands the SB was diligent

over the last year in finding the most cost effective way for residents to continue receiving trash and recycling services as a municipal option at a time when more neighboring communities are getting out of the business in part or as a whole.

There are many positives in the new process. Recently I had a resident assert they went to the compost area where there was no line and she was in and out within minutes. Oddly enough the information was delivered in a somewhat accusatory tone. I had to ask if her complaint was that the system avoided creating crowds, therefore her efficient visit was a complaint. After thinking about it she was as confused as I was by the complaint. It also has proven to be less expensive for residents as opposed to the alternative other communities are adopting, which is: you are on your own.

There have been over 2,300 reservations made by over 650 unique emails and 750 unique addresses. There has been significant appreciation expressed that there are not the long lines which plagued the previous two-day-a-week model and people are able to drop off quickly which saves them the time that outweighs significantly the amount it takes to make an appointment online. We thank all those family members, friends or neighbors who assisted some residents in making an appointment.

Any time a change is implemented there will be pushback, and all parties involved on the administration/management side will continue to explore other methods and processes which may alleviate cost or inconvenience. However, we will not be able to simply make it all go away. As we have been discussing for months, the cost of disposal continues to rise for trash and recycling. The required protections for employees related to COVID-19 has added to that burden. The changes are not punitive and there is no one working for the town who is profiting by these changes - it is simply necessary.



It also has been historically true that the costs associated with the Transfer Station was not always born by the residents who use the facility. It was even more clear that in some situations there was abuses regarding the materials being delivered. A person who is replacing drywall in a house in Holyoke or Granby should not force all the residents of South Hadley to accept the cost of that disposal just because the drywaller lives in South Hadley and has a sticker. (This is just an example, it is not directed at you, whoever you are or think you are). Nevertheless, this has become an increased concern of a costly unfair practice.

Just as a review of some points here and in earlier comments, it is less expensive overall if residents place “green bags” at the curb on their regular pick-up. I also would like to remind residents that Republic, the contractor who does the pick-up and hauls, will soon be offering a collection service for the in-between week as business agreement between the contractor and resident.

Again, thank you for your cooperation and patience. Together it allows us to continue to provide this service to you, the resident, at a competitive cost and avoids you individually having to contract at higher cost per household.

South Hadley Dog Park



To say this project has been “snake bitten” would be less than fair. Very few will know how incredibly difficult this project has been. However, the park is shaping up well as we near the end of the construction. JAM Construction of Worcester, the lowest bidder, has been great to work with and the dedication from Jeff Squire of Berkshire Design has been exemplary.

I acknowledge there is some considerable skepticism
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(some well-deserved) surrounding the park construction and future operation. Only time will tell whether it is the value to the public I and others believe it could become. The diligence of the Friends of the South Hadley Dog Park will be critical and so far, they have met that challenge. I applaud their individual and collective efforts in making this happen. Without their advocacy it would not have become a reality.

The park has been constructed under a grant program from the Stanton Foundation (\$221K) which covers 100% of the design and 75% of the construction for dog parks throughout the Commonwealth, including South Hadley. The care and maintenance responsibilities have been accepted by the Friends of the South Hadley Dog Park, a 501c3 organization created for the purpose of advocating for, promotion of and maintenance of an off-leash dog park in South Hadley.



The “Friends” will maintain rules previously agreed upon several months ago by the Selectboard and will have additional restrictions in place as part of COVID-19 and the related Mass DPH Guidelines. The group will also be responsible for the general maintenance of the park once open.

This hopefully will be a model partnership, not only for other communities, but for other initiatives in South Hadley, somewhat like the prototype set by South Hadley GROs at the Town Farm. As there are more requests for leisure activities, municipalities will need to ask the advocates to find a way to build and maintain those facilities and activities. The proponents should also have a voice in participation policies for those spaces or initiatives.

When some hear this they do recoil and wish and hope for the “good old days” when life was simpler. A time when today’s complex challenges of providing services was cheaper and less structured. Those halcyon days when a few people would express a need and everyone’s tax dollars would be spent on the idea, even if there were no indication the larger community may be interested, are gone.

I get it, but having the people who help when a tree falls in the town space used exclusively by their organization is appropriate. Especially when a participation fee is levied for the activity. When a tree falls across a street which is open for use to everyone, then the municipality does and should do everything possible to remove the tree as soon as possible. When it falls on properties or in an area of public land the appropriate urgency should apply.

It is a foregone conclusion that the grand opening once envisioned for the dog park will be much subdued. Once completed we will hope people will utilize it safely and within the posted regulations. It will also be an opportunity for the town to redouble its efforts to stop the practice of “off leash” dogs on trails throughout town. A practice which is verboten already. Remember - please pick up after your dog.

Again, thank you to all who made this possible, especially the Stanton Foundation!

Town Hall Services



As you can see from the photo of Town Clerk Carlene Hamlin administering the required in-person marriage intentions, we all are trying to find ways to deliver services in new ways.

As was outlined in a recent newspaper article, the pandemic is having rippling effects on municipal services in every city and town. We are not alone.

We continue to replace and add signage at parks and along trails. Unfortunately we are experiencing a higher level of vitriolic vandalism against these measures. We understand the level of frustration is

elevated - it is for all of us - but we ask that individuals do not take their animas out on signs, or refuse to leash their dog, or not wear a mask when appropriate. We are delivering “green bags,” the library has a new grab-and-go program, and we are offering yoga in the park. These are just a few of the measures we have taken to deliver services in a different way.

It has been a testimony to the citizens of South Hadley as so many have understood and cooperated. Of course, there are those who stand out, who threaten and demand that everything go back to the way it was. They are thankfully the minority while the vast majority understand we are just trying to do what we can to protect the public and provide service. Thank you!

Recent Bond Refunding and Issuance

The Selectboard recently completed a refunding of \$5.5 million worth of borrowing which took advantage of low municipal bond rates. The savings overall is about \$489K over the life of the notes. The largest overall savings was in “excluded debt” (Plains, school repairs etc.) of about \$413K all of which will go back directly to the taxpayers. It will not on average make an appreciable difference in anyone’s annual tax bill, but it is a prudent strategy and does not increase the bill.

The bonding process will be completed by July 21 and will total \$11.4 million which will include the final portion of borrowing for the Senior Center Project. Moody’s Rating Service, who rates the town’s credit worthiness, and Piper Sandler, the firm which sells negotiated municipal bonds, along with BNY Mellon who purchased the debt, all were effusive in their praise for the fiscal planning and strategies for dealing with the pandemic. While our rating did not change from Aa2 we also were not downgraded as so many other communities are experiencing.

We still have some blemishes which we are working on, but with new financial policies and trying to right the ship at the Ledges due to the “Season of COVID,” South Hadley is in a great position to survive and prosper post pandemic. I am extremely lucky to be able to work with professionals like Town Accountant William Sutton, Treasurer/Collector Donna Whiteley and have the ear of outside experts like David Eisenthal (Unibank Fiscal Services), Attorney Matt Feher (KP Law) and Tom Scanlon (Scanlon Associates) to help guide the process and create success. Thank you!

Diversity and Inclusion in the Municipal Workplace

This subject matter, which has been brought to the forefront of the public consciousness by the atrocities occurring across this nation, has been part of an on-going dialogue in South Hadley internally as part of the municipal training and recruitment for over seven years. I want to make sure this statement is not misinterpreted or to suggest we are doing nearly enough.

Personally, I have had the honor to serve on a statewide “Diversity and Inclusion Committee” hosted by the Massachusetts Municipal Association and equally honored to be allowed to be involved in the South Hadley Symposium of Understanding. We also continue to provide professional development centered around how we accept and provide service to a diverse populous. This diversity spectrum includes race, economic, gender, religion, orientation, opinion, age, or a long list of other variants which make our “individuality.”

The South Hadley Selectboard has been incredibly supportive of these exercises, discussions, and affiliations. The Symposium of Understanding and the quiet but important work associated with that forum was supported over the last five years by the Selectboard and especially guided and advocated for by Selectboard Member Sarah Etelman. This work has been important and informative in making the nascent progress in becoming more diverse and understanding how acceptance is crucial to our success.

Again, there is a great deal of work still to be done for South Hadley. This must be more than movement; it must be an on-going commitment. The recent strong statement by the South Hadley Selectboard was

important and will make a difference, I applaud their leadership. The change to become a more accepting community, region, and state we need to recognize there are some more camouflaged signs of exclusion.

Yes, we are starting to make progress in hiring and promoting more women and people of color. We continue to encourage educational growth, and we continue to review our hiring policies overall to attract more diversity to the ranks of all departments, however we must recognize how bylaws and particularly zoning laws intentionally or unintentionally create barriers to attracting or expressing the need for citizens which are demographically different. Do we offer services in transportation, language, jobs or other needs to make South Hadley a magnet for all?

This must not be directed at one part or component of the municipality or the town. It is not just a “police” problem. The need to address this is on all levels of municipal departments and the town as a whole. We need everyone to be involved in the discussion.

At a recent “virtual” conference hosted by the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (Boston) that I attended in my continuing education on the subject matter, it was stated “there is no magic potion or blueprint to follow” to create a culture wholly fair and equitable, but with continued dialogue and thoughtful conversation we can become a more understanding society.

Thank you all for lending your voices and support over the last several trying months. There are more challenges ahead, but with reason and resolve we will come out a stronger and more resilient Town of South Hadley.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael J. Sullivan
Town Administrator, South Hadley