

## **City Council Work Session October 11, 2021**

Present were: Mayor Grenier, Councilors Eastman, Remillard, Morgan, Theberge, Berthiaume, Rozek, Higbee and Otis.

Others present: City Manager Jim Wheeler, Community Development Director Pamela Laflamme, Fire Chief James Watkins, SAU3 Superintendent Julie King, AVH President Mike Peterson, CCFHS CEO Ken Gordon, Members of the Public including: Erica Hoyt and Nicole Plourde, and William Carroll, Berlin Daily Sun.

Mayor Grenier called the meeting to order at 6:33pm.

### **Current State of Pandemic in the Community (Mike Peterson, President AVH, Ken Gordon, CEO CCFHS)**

Mr. Wheeler advised he received a call last Friday from Mr. Peterson advising the hospital had more Covid cases than they've ever experienced since the start of the pandemic and asked what the City could do to get the word out. Mr. Wheeler commented the code red memo went out Friday and he invited Mr. Peterson and Mr. Gordon to come tonight to give an update on the severity of the current state.

Mr. Gordon presented some [handouts](#) to Council and spoke about the seriousness of the current state in the North Country. He explained the handouts include numbers from statistics which represent people. The first slide shared is from the NY times with live data reporting new cases throughout the pandemic starting May 2020 for Coos County. There are a few spikes throughout which were driven by the outbreaks in skilled nursing facilities in the area as well as the prisons. He pointed out to the spike that occurred in mid-September that continues to increase and advised the spike was largely community driven and is higher than it's ever been. The second slide includes a bit more information and is presenting cases per 100K for Coos County compared to the rest of the State of NH since March 2020. The mid-September spike clearly shows Coos County is far greater than the rest of the State. The third slide compares Coos County versus the other Counties in NH. Coos County rates are at least twice as high as virtually anywhere else in the State with the exception of Sullivan County. The last slide presented is from the NHDHHS released today showing active cases throughout the State. The total active cases for Berlin, Milan and Gorham combined is 146 which is much higher than the rest of the State. Berlin is at 91 active cases. He commented with this spike in cases, CCFHS continues to struggle with staff being out either with illness or quarantine with children that are sick or have been exposed. They continue to offer testing and vaccination services. The need to preserve the capacity of the health care system is important. The point of this presentation was to ask for help, the need to think about all hands-on deck, all measures that can be taken to communicate to the Public the seriousness of the situation so people can protect themselves and their families. Think about all the mitigation measures available to municipalities to keep their residents safe and it needs to be communicated to the Public as much as possible.

Mr. Peterson thanked everyone for the response last Friday and commented he believes that the code red message was heard and had an impact. He stated he spent some time at AVH's emergency dept. yesterday and the staff noticed a decrease in non-emergent cases coming to the ED. The cases decreased from 40 patients coming in Friday to 15 Saturday. He shared some differences in what is happening with this surge versus what was seen up to this point in the pandemic. Patients are coming in younger and sicker. The good news for the Southern part of the State is that the hospitalizations are stabilizing, but the ICU beds are full. He stated that, as of last Friday, the ICU at AVH was at 87% capacity. He stated they are having a hard time transferring the sickest of the sick people out cause Dartmouth and CMC are at capacity. He stated they are depending on their sister critical access hospitals to help out with non-Covid patients as the number of patients they can't control coming into

the ED, are Covid patients that are really sick. He stated AVH has 25 total beds which includes the women services. As of this afternoon, there are 11 inpatient Covid positives, 82% of those folks are unvaccinated. There is currently one ICU and one med surge bed available with 3 Covid positive patients in the ED. They are not sure where they will put the Covid positive patients at this time. He commented they do rapid testing as part of their daily testing. They did 70 rapid tests today and 25% came back positive which represents 1 in 4 people testing positive. In the last 7 days they lost a community member to Covid. There are 8 staff members out with Covid, 7 of which are unvaccinated. They've seen over 12 positive cases in the ED and treated them in the ED over the weekend. They are in status red, every day the NH Hospital Association collects the data out of their system and every hospital is coded on a green, yellow, orange or red status. At this time, they can't take any inbound patients and they are looking to off load patients. They've been transferring patients out of this community that they just can't take care of because of staffing. They've been in status red for about a half a week. They had never been in red status before. They've already delayed some inpatient elective surgeries. Even though they are not there yet, they are considering delaying all inpatient elective surgeries within 24-48hrs as they need the oxygen, the staff and beds. He commented the oxygen is measured by inches, there's a big O2 tank farm that is liquid oxygen and they measure how much they use per day. During a normal day, they go through 1 to 2 inches. Last Wednesday, they went through 18 inches and yesterday 13 inches. He has been reassured that the supply chain is solid, Amerigas has them on a monitoring system, they watch in real time and if the tanks get low, they deliver. They also have a contingency plan with the National Guard in case they need an additional delivery. They've had to pull back volunteer services, patient transport and visitors. The staff is starting to feel the impact and it is emotionally trying on them. The staff is getting really tired and are asking what they can do to help. Mr. Peterson commented that is the reason he is here tonight to ask for the community's help. The code red message was right on point and this is a great example of what can be done to raise awareness. This wave is here and frankly if human behavior is not changed, it will get worse before it gets better. He commented that not only are we fighting this virus, we're fighting human behavior. What has been frustrating to the staff and providers is they know this is avoidable, but frankly it's too late for vaccines to help right now. They need to keep pushing the vaccine as in 6 or 8 weeks from now, they don't want to be in the same situation. He is here to promote vaccination as this is the way long term, but for now, vaccines won't help. What will help is social distancing, masking and hand hygiene. Everything that existed before the vaccine.

Councilor Rozek questioned how many beds does the hospital have. Mr. Peterson responded they are licensed for 25 beds, but have a surge contingency plan allowing to go up to 50 in crisis. Councilor Berthiaume questioned if AVH and CCFHS as organizations could get the information out in real time via Facebook for example to keep the community aware. She commented that if the community knows of the crisis they will act responsibly. Mr. Peterson advised AVH posts information and the NCH page has information about daily reports which is their source of data from the State. He commented they can certainly reroute the information to a local page to reach as much people as possible. Councilor Berthiaume commented she feels it's important for the community to be informed. Mr. Gordon commented he agrees the Public needs to be aware. He knows people will respond differently but what is important at this time is masking, social distancing, hanging low for the next 2-3 weeks till this wave goes down. Mayor Grenier asked Mr. Wheeler to put together a small communiqué encouraging masking, social distancing and vaccination signed by the City Manager, the Mayor and Fire Chief Watkins, and Post to Facebook and in the local newspaper.

Erica Hoyt from 290 Willard Street asked for permission from Council to speak. Council granted permission. Ms. Hoyt stated she is currently employed at AVH and her role is supposed to be the Administrative Assistant to the Director of the Med Surge floor, however, since Covid, her job has dramatically changed. It is now more stressful than enjoyable. Her job has now been to manage the Covid phone, which can entail over 200 calls per day. She commented that at the end of the line are people that aren't always pleasant and nice to interact with, calling to get a Covid test, calling to get test

results, calling to yell because they don't do testing for travel purposes. She also stated she needs to go in the Covid tent 3 days a week, fully gowned with the N95 mask to prepare swabs and hand them out to the nurses so they can go outside and swab everybody in the community. She stated she doesn't understand how it got this far and why instead of talking about it, just do something about it. She commented we talk about a mask mandate, people needing to stay home, why not enforce it. She commented that on Friday, they did 104 rapid swabs and 27 came back positive. She also advised her husband works for the school district and it's a constant battle having kids keep their masks on. She feels the Public is just not informed. She sometimes spends 15-25 minutes on the phone per call when calling individuals to let them know they have Covid as they're not informed and have no clue what to do. She is hoping a solid plan is put in place. She feels we should not just be saying people need to mask up, we need to make people mask up.

Mayor Grenier asked Mr. Peterson and Mr. Gordon to keep City Manager Wheeler updated in real time as council meets every Monday and if the situation worsens, we will have to take it from there.

Nicole Plourde from 111 Washington Street asked for permission from Council to speak. Council granted permission. Ms. Plourde stated she attended the meeting as she thought there would be a mask mandate and wanted to show support. She feels there should be a City Ordinance stating if someone tests positive for Covid, they need to stay home. If they don't, there should be repercussions for going out and about in the community. She doesn't think everyone fully understands the risks. She commented she appreciates what the City leadership has done in the beginning when Covid first started, but now it is really serious and feels leadership needs to step up and take initiative to mandate masks and stay home.

Councilor Remillard commented she agrees with the two citizens who spoke and does feel the mask mandate should be enforced. All businesses should be required to enforce masking. Mr. Wheeler commented Council could re institute the Mask Ordinance. Mayor Grenier commented he doesn't feel a mask mandate is going to help as it creates division. He commented the first step is to send a message to the Public, including businesses, on the severity of the situation and hope it encourages Members of the Public to protect themselves and families. Councilor Rozek commented that responsible people are wearing masks and feels businesses should offer masks as you enter. Mr. Wheeler commented that what will make people wear a mask is a poster on the door that states "Masks Required". The City did this back in the spring following Governor Sununu's order, but maybe this time just communicating with businesses encouraging them to require masks due to the severity of the situation in our area. Mayor Grenier suggested educating the community on the situation as average people in the community don't know and communicate that it takes work from everyone in the community to improve the current situation.

Erica Hoyt from 290 Willard Street asked for permission from Council to speak. Council granted permission. Ms. Hoyt commented there is already a division in the community in regards to the vaccinated vs the unvaccinated. She doesn't understand how it will be any different if a mask mandate is not done.

Mayor Grenier thanked Mr. Peterson and Mr. Gordon for coming tonight and alerting Council and the Community of the severity of the issue being dealt with.

### **Chamber ATV Parking Request**

Mayor Grenier read a communication from the Androscoggin Valley Chamber of Commerce requesting permission to utilize the empty lot across the street from the Heritage Park for OHRVs during the ATV poker run which is part of the RiverFire event on October 16, 2021. Councilor Rozek moved to accept the communication from the Androscoggin Valley Chamber of Commerce and allow the use of the empty lot for parking, Councilor Higbee seconded and the motion carried by all in favor.

**Rte. 110 Discussion**

Mayor Grenier commented that the two first proposal were rejected by Council, but the City Manager did a great job putting together an agreement with NH DOT. Councilor Eastman commented that his take from the Public Hearing was that 90% of the Citizen's complaints were related to the road conditions. He feels the agreement with DOT addresses all concerns. Councilor Remillard commented she was pleased with the Public Hearing as the majority were open to the agreement. She stated if the City wants growth, that corridor is the perfect place. Councilor Higbee prepared some numbers to present to Council to help understand the cost burden over a 26-year projection period compared to the cost in 2021. He concluded by stating that \$10,000,000 is needed from taxes to make this happen. Mayor Grenier reminded Council that this project will be part of the 10-year plan which 80% is funded by the State and 20% from the Municipality. He expressed his full support of the project as this is the last area for potential development and it's an opportunity to move forward. He suggested setting up the timeline to February 1<sup>st</sup>, as this will give three more months of road maintenance from NH DOT. Councilor Remillard commented she wished it was effective immediately as effective November 1<sup>st</sup>, ATVs can't use the highway. Councilor Eastman asked about the \$250,000 funding for engineering and the need to do an RFP. Ms. Laflamme commented there will be a resolution at next Monday's Council meeting for this funding and once approved, she will submit a request for RFQ. Mayor Grenier commented he spoke with developers and all were OK with the February 1<sup>st</sup> effective date. This will also give time for Taxpayers to be made aware.

**Non-Public**

At 7:58 pm, Councilor Berthiaume moved with a second from Councilor Higbee to enter into non-public session per RSA 91-A:3 II; (a) The dismissal, promotion or compensation of any public employee. The motion carried unanimously by roll call.

Compensation of a public employee matter was discussed.

At 8:26pm, Council and Staff came out of non-public session.

**Adjournment**

There being no further business, Councilor Rozek moved to adjourn; Councilor Theberge seconded and the motion carried by all in favor. The meeting ended at 8:27 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Danielle Rioux  
Executive Assistant

\*Minutes are unofficial until they have been accepted by the City Council by motion.