

TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Albany County - New York

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State of the Town—Pandemic Edition

May 21, 2020

I'm David VanLuven and I'm the Bethlehem Town Supervisor.

Every day we hear about COVID-19 at the County and State levels, and although we've been living with it every day for more than 2 months, I wanted to take a few minutes to talk about COVID-19 in Bethlehem, what it means, what we're doing, and what you need to do

My goal tonight is not to convince you that we're in the midst of the pandemic, but rather to help you understand what this pandemic means and to demonstrate that, together, we have Bethlehem on a path to recovery and rebuilding.

STATE OF COVID-19 IN BETHLEHEM

It's difficult to get an exact number of reported positive cases for the Town as a whole because the state database is organized by zip code.

- But as of this morning, something under 100 residents over the course of the pandemic have been reported as infected.
- The trend for these infections was a slow but steady rise through March and April to a peak of about 20 residents in mandatory quarantine each day.
- Over the last several weeks, infection rates have slowed and recoveries have allowed infected residents to be released from quarantine.
- As of today, we have 13 reported positive cases in mandatory quarantine in Bethlehem. 2 of these victims are in the hospital, and they have been there for more than a month.
- I was not able to get a precise number of deaths due to COVID-19 in town, but I can say that thankfully it has been very low.



The main reasons we're seeing a drop in reported infections is that most people are responsibly wearing masks and practicing good social distancing. These actions are simple and they are vital. They are inconvenient and we're all thoroughly tired of them. My daughters are tired of them. My neighbors are tired of them. I'm tired of them. But we MUST be vigilant and we MUST keep our masks on and our distance from each other!

In the midst of the hardship COVID-19 has brought to our community, I am seeing positive adaptations.

- For example, there are more walkers and cyclists than ever before in our suburban neighborhoods.
- I see small groups of friends sitting 6-10' apart around fire pits in driveways.
- And people are saying hello because we're seeing each other outside and being reminded that we're part of a great community.

BETHLEHEM IS STRONG

I'm also seeing inspiring acts of kindness and community support.

- When our Police met a mother and daughter whose car had broken down and who were stranded, the staff at LaBerge Tire & Auto Service in Glenmont pooled their resources to pay for all repairs.
- The Senior class at Bethlehem Central High School donated \$4,000 that they raised to the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce's Business Hardship Fund, and \$6,000 to the South End Children's Cafe.
- And the Together, We Are One Bethlehem campaign has spread purple signs, shirts, and tote bags throughout town as a powerful reminder that we're a strong community of neighbors who care and who support each other.

Even though Town Hall is closed to the public, your Town government has been working through the pandemic and continues to be here for you.

- Every day, our staff are delivering clean water, taking away and processing sewage, patrolling neighborhoods, gathering more yard debris than ever before since everyone is home raking and trimming, and raking and trimming.
- Social workers in our Senior Services Dept have connected volunteers with particularly isolated seniors, such as a 92-yo resident with no family nearby, to check on their wellbeing twice each week and to shop for and deliver groceries.
- Our Town Clerk's Office devised a creative way to issue marriage licenses by meeting with couples in the Town Hall parking lot. This might sound like a small thing, but it's a big deal to the couples she's helping.



- And our Building Division is conducting selected site inspections using Facetime, and is still processing building permit applications quickly and carefully. In one case, when a tree fell through the roof of a 90-yo resident's home, we had the permit reviewed and to her contractor in 2 hours. Our Building Division's procedures are so good, in fact, that the Capital Region Builders & Remodelers Association is using Bethlehem as a model for other municipalities.

LOOKING FORWARD

Like this spring, COVID-19 will create challenges for us this summer.

I'm very sorry to announce that the pool complex will be closed indefinitely. The reason is safety: people can't swim in masks, and we will NOT ask teenage lifeguards to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on someone with COVID-19. This was a hard decision, because we all love the pools, but it is the right one for the safety of our residents and our staff.

Now, if circumstances change and we get guidance from the State Dept of Health on ways to safely open all or part of the complex for part of the season, we will. But for now, my expectation is that we will not be able to open this year.

We are also cancelling all full-day summer camps that are normally provided by our Parks & Rec Dept. This decision is consistent with private day camps across the region. The reason is that we don't see any way to provide a full day of programs and still keep our staff and residents safe, not only from COVID-19, but also from heat and dehydration if staff and kids are wearing masks outside for 8-9 hours on hot days.

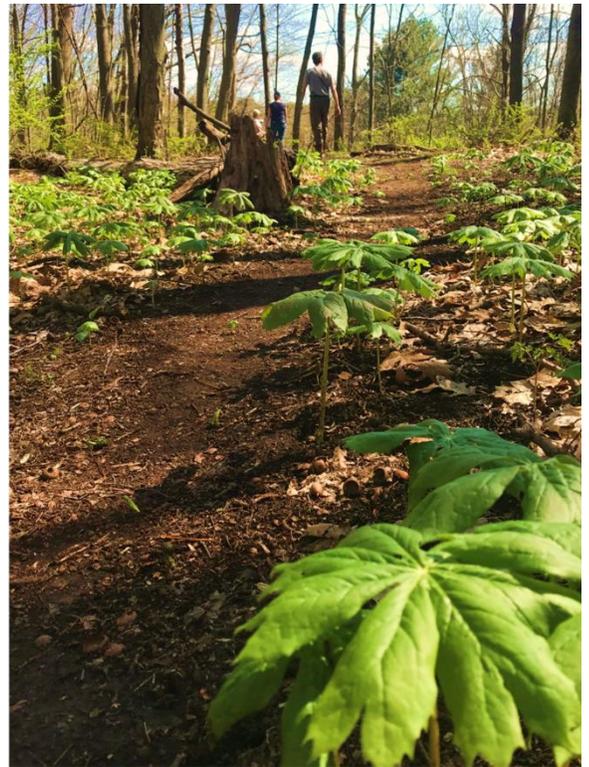
On the more positive side, our Parks Dept is working hard to find other solutions for kids, such as half day sessions for small groups with good social distancing.

We're also, working hard to keep parks open to everyone, including tennis courts.

And speaking of parks, we are creating a new nature park in Delmar and Elsmere called the Normans Kill Ravines. At 147 acres, it's about the same size as Elm Ave Park, and we're working with a wonderful group of mountain bikers to put in walking and biking trails so people can explore the park's gorgeous landscape of ravines, forests, floodplains, and rivershore.

We are also working with Scenic Hudson to add 20 acres to Henry Hudson Park in Selkirk. These additions will open a view of the beautiful Vloman Kill Falls to the public, and will be finalized as soon as law offices can reopen for us to sign the paperwork.

If you're wondering why we're expanding parks in an economic downturn, I can explain. These purchases are being made with monies from the Park Land Set Aside Fund. Developers pay fees into this fund whenever they put in housing developments. The purpose of the fund is to create and improve parks, and the fund can ONLY be used for these purposes. At a time when parks are in great demand, I assert that these are wise investments for the short term and for the future.



LOOKING FORWARD – TOWN BUDGET

In addition to navigating a pandemic not seen since WWI, we're also navigating an economic downturn not seen in 3 generations.

Town revenues are largely dependent on 2 key sources: property taxes and sales taxes.

The Town only gets 11 cents of every property tax dollar paid. Let me say that again. For every dollar of property taxes you pay, the Town of Bethlehem only sees 11 cents. The other 89 cents go elsewhere.

I'm stressing that the Town only sees 11 cents of every property tax dollar because sales tax revenues help us hold this number at such a low level.

- When sale tax revenues drop, the Town takes a hit. During the Great Recession in 2009, for example, the Town saw a revenue shortfall of \$1.1M.
- This year, sales tax revenues were strong in January and February, but came in \$150K below budget in March.
- If this trend continues through the rest of the year, the Town of Bethlehem could see a shortfall 2-3 times worse than during the Great Recession in 2009.

This is a problem faced by every municipality across the state. Fortunately, Bethlehem is in a better position than most municipalities because of smart, progressive decisions by our Town Comptroller, my predecessor John Clarkson, and the Town Board and me over the years.

We budgeted conservatively for 2020 despite the economy racing strong in 2019, and the Town has been working with skeletal staff levels that never rebounded after 2009 Great Recession. We therefore entered 2020 with a tight budget.

Despite that, I am working with staff to strategically cut spending by

- delaying hires for vacant positions,
- further reducing overtime and seasonal staff spending, and
- adjusting constantly as new information comes in.

I don't anticipate having to furlough or lay off staff, and we are working hard to avoid these drastic measures. This is important, because services are delivered by people, not the Town. So when anyone talks about cutting our staffing, they are also talking about cutting services. Please remember what I've been saying for 2 years: the Town doesn't deliver services, people do, so please wave and say thanks whenever you see a Town employee at work.

In an effort to offset our known and projected revenue losses, I have been supporting the efforts of Congressman Paul Tonko to get federal funds to help with our COVID-19 response, and we have been carefully tracking all expenses so we'll be in a position to get federal funding should it become available.

I am also supporting the efforts of Senator Neil Breslin and Assemblywoman Pat Fahy to defend key state funding to the Town, particularly for paving and road maintenance. Road maintenance is a bad thing to cut, because delays in maintenance can make the cost of repairs TEN TIMES more expensive down the road.

Through it all, we need to remember that COVID-19 is a setback, not the end, and I, the Town Board, and our Town staff are working strategically to continue delivering services that support our town while also limiting spending wherever possible.



YOU HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES TOO

I've spent a lot of time talking about what the Town is doing. I'd like to take a few moments to talk about what each of us can also do.

First, we need to buy local. It's easy to go online and buy from Amazon, but that does nothing to support our workforce or the businesses that are fundamental parts of Bethlehem's fabric. Please, buy local. Support your neighbors and support your Town by buying local!

Second, support campaigns to help local businesses. The *Invest in Bethlehem* campaign, for example, is matching donations up to \$4,000 to be distributed to businesses by the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce and Bethlehem Community Fund. Whether you donate through *Invest in Bethlehem*, another campaign, or directly, if you can help our local businesses, please, please do!

Finally, please continue wearing your masks in stores and when you're near people in public. Masks aren't for your safety, they're for your neighbors'. As we're a community that cares, so let's all keep our masks on even when it's hot and even though we're tired of them. It will not help keep your neighbors safe, it will tell others that you care about their safety as well as your own.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to thank all of our Town employees for their flexibility, creativity, and dedication to delivering services to our residents and businesses.

Thanks to our businesses small and large who are fighting to keep operating, keep providing jobs, and keep providing services that our community needs.

And thanks to all of you for being patient, being courteous, and being good neighbors.

This is a terrible time, but it's reminding me yet again what a great town Bethlehem is and how lucky we are to live in this community.

Be kind, be well, and stay safe!



David VanLoven
Town Supervisor



You can watch the
State of the Town–Pandemic Edition address
and other addresses back to 2012
on the Town of Bethlehem website:

<http://bethlehemtownny.igm2.com/Citizens/Media.aspx>

You can find photos and information celebrating
Bethlehem's town workers, residents,
and businesses on Facebook:

www.facebook.com/BethlehemSupervisor

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