

News Conference

March 19, 2020

Kevin Captain, Interim Community Information Director, County of Volusia

Good evening, I'm Kevin Captain, Interim Director of Community Information for Volusia County Government. Thank you for joining up today. As the Coronavirus situation continues to evolve, Volusia County is focused its coordinated efforts with our state and local partners to address the situations and prepare for the future.

We continue to say it, but this is an unprecedented situation. We appreciate the public's cooperation and understanding as the situation evolves.

Tonight we have a few speakers for this evenings press conference, Volusia County Chair Ed Kelley, Volusia County Manager George Recktenwald, District Three County Council Member Deb. Denys, New Smyrna Beach Mayor Russ Owen, Daytona Beach Mayor Derrick Henry as well as Sheriff Mike Chitwood. With that, Volusia County Chair Ed Kelley.

Ed Kelley, Volusia County Chair

Good afternoon, this morning after the MAG meeting, the County Manager George Recktenwald. I had a conversation discussing the issues and the situation we had with the beach access. A few hours after that, George called me and said we need to talk because he felt like we there were things that needed to be addressed with the upcoming weekend and he would like to make some adjustments to the open beaches.

I won't take his thunder away from it. George will share that information with you but it was after he and I talked after working with it trying to make it the best for the residents and those that are here as well. George.

George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

Good evening, at our last conference we announced that the council decided our beaches would remain open with strict guidelines put in place to at hear the CDC safety recommendations. Now that decision was based off the governor's announcement to keep the Florida beaches open as well as an effort to best protect all those in the county with still providing a safe opportunity for people to appreciate our coastal outdoors. It's important to note that the past few days over 70% of our vehicle entry to our beach have been by Volusia County residents annual pass holders. So a large majority of the beach goers are our residents here in Volusia County.

Our Beach Safety and Coastal teams have worked diligently to inform all beach goers of enhanced restrictions which include limiting groups less than 10 people and maintaining the 6-

foot distance from all of the groups. We also restricted vehicular access to 50% capacity. While we did see higher volumes of people in some of the areas of the beach. I'm very encouraged by the corporation we have received from the beach goers.

Throughout the last two days our beach safety team reported there have been limited issues and as a whole people have been receptive and respectful of the increased guidelines. We did note though as the tide moves in beach goers face the increased challenges to maintain the required spacing with limited amount of the beach. At this happened our staff worked proactively to prevent crowds from gathering and to disperse groups as necessary. However looking towards this weekend we have decided to enact additional measures to potential issues.

Starting tomorrow Friday in New Smyrna Beach vehicular beach access ramps will remain closed. This means cars will not be able to access the beach in New Smyrna tomorrow. Saturday and Sunday this will also be the case at all vehicle ramp locations throughout the county. This will serve as a measure of crowd control. Given the weather reports and so many people off work, this weekend we anticipate much bigger crowds to use the beach. We must provide our staff the ability to manage the situation, maintain the safety of the citizens by enforcing the CDC guidelines. Now I'd like to bring up your District 3 County Council Member Deb Denys.

Deb Denys, County Council Member County of Volusia

Thank you Mr. Rectenwald. Good evening, as a district 3 county council representative I represent a very large area in the county including New Smyrna beach. And as a beach town, my town New Smyrna Beach has experienced heavier crowd than some other areas of the county. I have been working very closely with the county and the city to balance safety of our residents while also considering our visitors. Looking towards this weekend I am encouraged these new measures will help insure the safety of all of our citizens. We have listened and we have been working collaboratively behind the scenes, many phone calls, many meetings, many, many conversations with our city leaders, my Mayor that you will hear from in just a minute and the New Smyrna Beach City Commission to elevated the buildup that has occurred because of now Central Florida amusement closures, Coco Beach closures and now the Canaveral National Sea Shore. The closest route from Orlando to the beaches are through New Smyrna Beach on State Road 44. That dynamic has resulted in a surge on our roads, leading to New Smyrna Beach and the connectors to our beach. As the situation continues to evolve, we will maintain communications with our partners to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all of our citizens. Now I'd like to bring up my Mayor from New Smyrna Beach Russ Owen. Mr. Mayor.

Russ Owen, Mayor, City of New Smyrna Beach

Thank you Deb. We all know the communities that's been said have been unprecedented challenges and we must respond in kind as we're talking about today, these are not decisions we take lightly. These aren't things that we do quickly. Not necessarily without fault, but we

certainly feel these are the right decisions. Not easy decisions but are the right decisions to make. So I'm happy to report we worked closely with our county leadership these past few days and monitoring and discussing beach access in New Smyrna Beach specifically. Out of abundance of caution and with public health and safety is a top priority. Keeping that forever in our minds, we ask the citizens of New Smyrna, and Volusia County take these measures to temporarily suspend vehicle access to the beaches of New Smyrna.

I believe this measure will reduce the number of folks that are coming in from the outside of our community and will leave space for those locals that want to get out and spread out and want to enjoy the sun and fresh air. These prudent actions now early on will allow us to ensure, we as a community are following the latest set CDC guidelines with regards limiting travel and encouraging social distancing to help flatten the curve, so that we can return to our normal daily routines just as soon as possible. That's what we all want.

So I appreciate Deb's support and the entire Volusia County team's support and looking forward to continue to work closely together as we monitor this situation daily.

Derrick Henry, Mayor, City of Daytona Beach

I am Mayor Derrick Henry from Daytona Beach and while we reside in, what I refer to as community with the world's greatest beach. In fact it is known as the World's Most Famous Beach. The fact that we live in a community where there are 26 miles of beach. We recognize that. But not all beaches are even or equal in terms of their appeal, by name alone.

So with that being said since the very beginning of this crises, I have been on the record as one who wanted to limit and reduce the access to the beach because of the importance of helping us to limit the spread of the virus.

So I want to express my appreciation for the decisions that have been made here today by our county leadership and to express to all members of our community how difficult of a decision that this is for all of us. The one that I support and will continue to support as we move forward. And I want to encourage our residents to realize that there are other outlets in your community where you live. Take that natural walk through your neighborhood. Find ways to enjoy the parks that remain open. Whatever the decisions that are made by the county, let us be reminded that the decisions that are made are in the best interest of the residents of Volusia County.

Thank you, and at this time I would like to introduce our Sheriff, Mike Chitwood.

Sheriff Michael Chitwood, Volusia County Sheriff's Office

Good afternoon. I just want to remind everybody that tomorrow will be a week that we stood in this room, the President declared National Emergency. The governor declared a National Emergency. We are only one week in to this, and if you look and see how our Health Department has responded. How AdventHealth, Halifax Health, first responders, the Mayors and the County

Council. I think everybody should take a sigh of relief and say Thank God, I live in Volusia County and I am surrounded by such professionals. And as you watch what we are trying to do, this is an evolving every week, every day the situation changes. There is a lot of people here trying to do the best they can do to protect our community and balance the interest of the community.

So I want everybody to take a step back and think of that. Think of where we were a week ago, where we are today, and where we will be next week. Tomorrow morning when we wake up, this crisis will be one day closer to being behind us.

So I hope that the good Lord continues to bless this county and this country as we fight this unprecedented crisis because I know we are going to come out on the other side.

Kevin Captain, Interim Community Information Director, County of Volusia

Thank you Sheriff.

As we continue to state, this situation changes daily. And as it does, county services may need to be adjusted or amended as appropriate. We remind everybody that for the latest information, go to Volusia.org/coronavirus. As the Sheriff said, every day is a little bit different and the President's COVID-19 task force had a great modifier. And the modifier was "This is like a baseball game. And we are making decisions that are different with every inning."

There is a lot of questions about why didn't we do this and why didn't we do that. We are trying to make the best decisions as the information comes to us. We have a great team assembled and we appreciate the cooperation and the cooperation of our visitors and residents.

With that we will take questions. We will have someone walk around with a microphone and we are Facebooking this live so that the questions can be heard.

Question # 1

Why not simply close the beaches for now and then you can dial back. But you won't be able to ramp up with more people are expected to be there this weekend. You won't be able to dial that back once they all get there. You'll remove the cars, but you'll just make more room for more people if you are expecting more people to be out there. Why not just close the beaches for now and just reopen them later.

Responded by George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

That's a very good question. What I want to point out to everybody that our beaches are unique. It's one of the only places that we have vehicle access and when we say vehicle access, it provides parking for latterly thousands of cars. So this action here has the effect of really clearing out a beach that is at least two football fields wide and a lot of areas 50 miles long. I believe that that this is the best interest to still provide where we can. Places to be able to be

outside and being in an environment and by doing this, you are giving a lot of acreage back to people that they can enjoy and also it will make it a lot easier for our staff to be able to ensure people are following those guidelines. Just like they may be doing at other parks. Maybe they have ball games or things going on. But people are out there that do gather and they want to be out doors during this period of time.

So we feel very confident by taking this measure we will be able to handle this situation very effectively and we have other measures. We can continue to deal through the situation if we see that. That's what we are doing here. It may be easier in your terms, but I think the right thing to do is what we are doing and sometimes that's not always the easiest way of doing it.

Question # 2

Why not close access to all the beaches tomorrow rather than just to cars on the beaches rather than just doing it for New Smyrna.

Responded by Ed Kelley, Volusia County Chair

Let me answer that one, cause George and I have talked about that and one of the things that we thought and that George mentioned is we thought that would give us a chance to see if freeing up the personnel that would normally be in New Smyrna could adequately and enforce the CDC regulations of maintaining control and having enough people at the beach to maintain those regulations so that we are in compliance. That gives us a one day test window and we can go from that. I think that is the right approach that George made to do it that way. So it is like a test run and as you say it's evolving. Each day changes and this will give us a better understanding what we need to do after the weekend and see if we can go forward with the same or change.

Question # 3

What about parking lots, are you going to limit access to the off beach parking spots?

Responded by Ed Kelley, Volusia County Chair

The county parking lots are open, all of them in Daytona, the ones in Ormond Beach are open. New Smyrna parking lots will be open. And there is parking for approximately 3,000 or so vehicles at those parking facilities county wide.

Question # 4

How we plan to maintain those guide lines set forth by the CDC?

Responded by George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

Everyone's given instructions but we also will be out there in force with our beach patrol with our beach safety specialists. They will be out. They have the ability through their PA system to warn people and to help people get the proper spacing that they need. And again I think between

that and all the information that's out there without any prompting are already in that situation. They are already doing the social distancing that's required to keep everybody safe.

Question # 5

Do you expect those same crowds going to the beaches next week seeing how schools and colleges are out?

Responded by George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

What we are hearing from the Hotel and motel industry, the amount of bookings has fallen way off and many cancelations. Next week, you're going to see a much lighter crowd from the hotels.

Question # 6

Was there a lot of students there?

Responded by George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

Yes, there were a lot of college students, young people that like to come down to our area. But those are all being canceled, the bookings are down. The cases I'm hearing is low as 10% in some of these hotels.

Question # 7

Are the vehicles allowed back on the beach Monday?

Responded by George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

This is a very fluid situation and a lot of that will depend on again how well we are able to handle the situation this weekend and if we see that trend continues about fewer people, then we maybe will be able to go back to the 50% spacing we were doing now.

I think that is important remind everybody, we have already done a lot of what we are talking about by counting the people, spreading them out and shutting the ramps. Many of the ramps were shut down today. This is just a larger measure of what we expect to be a very beautiful weekend and it's going to entice many people to come to the beach.

Question # 8

At what point would you say to close and keep people off of the beach and away from each other?

Responded by George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

We will continue to work it out with the Health Department and consult it with the CDC. But if was to get to a point where they were saying no body should be out in any public space then that would be an area we would have to look at. But right now it's really dependent on how people corporate and work with us. Take self-responsibility. Like I said we are social creatures. We want to get together, but they have been very good about when asked to separate. I think a lot of us have a natural taenites to shake hands. Jim Judge said the other day he's a hugger. He's never hugged me. But when somebody reminds you. I think everyone's being very courteous and backing off of that and understanding that.

Question # 8

Will you reevaluate this decision on Monday?

Responded by George Recktenwald, County Manager, County of Volusia

Yes, we will reevaluate this on Sunday.

Question # 9

Are you going to release some of the inmates due to the virus?

Responded by Kevin Captain, Interim Community Information Director, County of Volusia

That is a collective decision that will be made with the courts and without the courts being represented tonight that is something we will defer to them.

Question # 10

Other counties have, why not Volusia County yet?

Responded by Kevin Captain, Interim Community Information Director, County of Volusia

I cannot speak to the courts, I do know there is some conversation being held but not a firm decision.

Any other questions- Okay with that we will close this conference. Everyone have a good evening. Thank you.