

**LEWIS COUNTY, WASHINGTON
BOARD OF HEALTH (BOH)/
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS (BOCC)
EMERGENCY MEETING MINUTES**

August 16, 2021

4 p.m.

Present: Commissioner Pollock, Commissioner Swope, Commissioner Stamper (4:10 p.m. via ZOOM), County Manager Erik Martin, Eric Eisenberg, Andrew Logerwell, JP Anderson, Meja Handlen, John Abplanalp, Sheriff Snaza, Amber Smith, Connie Riker, Jonathan Meyer, Austin Majors, Steve Wohld, Dr. Alan Melnick, Dr. Steven Krager, Dr. Kevin Caserta, American Medical Response (AMR) Operations Manager Tony Kuzma, various members of Lewis County staff

Guests: Various members of the public and press

Recorders: Sandi Andrus & Rieva Lester

Commissioner Pollock noted that the Board of County Commissioners and the Board of Health called the emergency meeting, as permitted under RCW 42.30.70, because a delay could increase the risk of injury to persons or property.

JP Anderson reported Lewis County has seen a huge increase in COVID-19 cases.

Commissioner Stamper joined via ZOOM at 4:10 p.m.

Eric Eisenberg noted that the commissioners could choose to deliberate in executive session if they so desired.

The meeting was paused shortly after it started due to technical difficulties with audio. The meeting resumed at 4:36 p.m.

Lewis County Deputy Health Officer Dr. Steven Krager said Lewis County currently has the highest rate of COVID-19 hospitalizations in the State. He and Health Officer Dr. Alan Melnick recommend that events with groups larger than 50 people be canceled. This would include the SW Washington Fair that begins tomorrow.

If the Fair does continue, **Dr. Krager** stated, he and Dr. Melnick recommend enforcing universal masking indoors and outdoors when physical distancing is not possible, social distancing, moving events outdoors, limiting capacity, and increasing ventilation at any indoor sites.

Commissioner Stamper asked if there are extra precautions the County could take to improve safety at the fairgrounds.

Steve Wohld discussed efforts the County could take, such as providing masks, having buildings be more open, more washing stations, more hand sanitizing stations, and increasing signage.

Connie Riker said bathrooms are cleaned every 90 minutes. They have a cleaning rotation for each unit. This is an increase over what their normal schedule would be.

Providence Chief Medical Officer Dr. Kevin Caserta noted that Centralia Hospital has canceled elective procedures in response to increased COVID-19 cases. Decreased capacity and staffing have been a huge concern for them. Centralia Hospital and St. Peter's Hospital are caring for 88 COVID-19 cases, compared to a previous high of fewer than 60 patients. Dr. Caserta noted that he is 48 years old and that there are COVID-19 patients at the hospital younger than he who will likely die this week due to COVID-19. We are getting close to maxing out the use of traditional ventilators and vents could become a challenge if the trend continues as it is going.

Commissioner Swope said he heard Dr. Caserta indicate he would like to use fear to encourage people to avoid the fair. **Dr. Caserta** replied he would use anything he could to keep people safe. A loud applause broke out in the Commissioners' Hearing Room. Dr. Caserta stated he would like people to be careful, mask, maintain within their family network, and do everything they can to be safe.

Commissioner Pollock asked how trauma patients would be cared for as the hospital faces capacity concerns. **Dr. Caserta** outlined efforts to care for trauma patients.

JP said his understanding was that Providence may need to seek the assistance of the National Guard to help staff the hospital. **Dr. Caserta** said Providence would look to meet the need with local staff if possible and would reach out to the National Guard as a last resort.

Commissioner Swope said he understands the following regarding Providence: staffing is down 60 percent, the hospital plans to fire more staff who do not get vaccinated, and 50 percent of the current COVID patients are vaccinated.

Dr. Caserta stated Providence staffing is not down 60 percent. Providence is looking into what they need to do according to the Governor's mandate and that Providence does not intend to fire staff. He said he does not want anyone to lose their jobs. He wants the community to do everything they can to be safe and knowing the facts about where the hospital is and the risks of our individuals is very important. Our goal is to keep the community safe.

Dr. Caserta said he would gather the information regarding the number of recent deaths and the percentage of vaccinated/unvaccinated COVID patients for Commissioner Swope.

Salkum Fire Chief Duran McDaniel said EMS personnel are facing a "round robin" effort to find hospital beds for patients. He said fire and medical resources are taken out

of commission for three to four hours as they wait for open beds and that emergency responders have had to have patients airlifted to other hospitals – at a cost of \$60,000 or more per flight – because nearby hospitals did not have capacity. Medical and fire resources could be tied up and taken out of the County to find a hospital for a patient.

American Medical Response (AMR) Operations Manager Tony Kuzma said AMR emergency personnel are waiting hours to get patients turned over to the hospitals. He said he has been shocked to see how frequently the hospitals are housing patients in hallways for days. The system is overwhelmed. He asked what emergency personnel are to do if there is nowhere to take the patients; the area needs more hospital capacity. It has been shown that when we have events that get people close together, there are spikes in the COVID numbers. The problem is going to get worse and we want an ambulance to be available when someone calls 911 but the system is overwhelmed.

Commissioner Pollock asked legal counsel if the County would take on additional liability if it moved forward with the fair despite the health officers' recommendations.

Eric Eisenberg reminded the Commissioners that they may receive his counsel in executive chambers. After a vote, they decided to continue in open public meeting. Eric said it is likely that if the County is put on notice regarding risks to the public and county employees but does not act, that makes it more likely that a lawsuit could follow and that the County would take on additional liability.

Jonathan Meyer and **Eric** noted that the County gets sued all the time for various reasons. Jonathan said the fact that fairgoers know the risks and still choose to go, provides some insulation for the County. However, the County could be at risk if employees were to sue.

Eric said some of the fair contracts do not include a force majeure clause, meaning the County would still have to honor the required payments. It is likely the County could be sued for breach of contract should it cancel the fair.

Eric recommended the Commissioners make liability-reducing recommendations such as:

- Suggest the public wear a mask inside and outside.
- Stay with family members; do not mix with others.
- Post signs that warn the public about the danger.

Commissioner Pollock said it appears the BOCC and BOH have three options:

- Close the fair.
- Proceed with mitigation efforts.
- Proceed with no changes.

Commissioner Pollock said she does not think the group should cancel the fair.

Commissioner Swope and **Commissioner Stamper** agreed.

Commissioner Pollock said the respectful thing to do would be to consider recommendations to control disease spread on the fairgrounds.

Commissioner Swope suggested the recommendations include:

- Encouraging guests to wear masks.
- Encouraging guests to social distance.
- Posting signs warning of potential COVID-19 dangers.

Dr. Krager suggested the following:

- Encourage mask use.
- Have individuals remind fairgoers to wear masks indoors.
- Move indoors events outdoors when possible.
- Increase ventilation indoors.
- Limit indoors capacity as much as possible by maintaining social distancing.

Commissioner Swope made a motion to proceed with the fair with the following recommendations:

- Encourage mask use.
- Remind fairgoers to wear masks indoors (but staff members are not to act as “enforcers”).
- Move indoors events outdoors when possible.
- Increase ventilation indoors.
- Limit indoors capacity as much as possible.
- Encourage fairgoers to maintain social distancing.

Commissioner Stamper seconded. Motion passed 3-0.

Commissioner Pollock adjourned the Board of Health/Board of County Commissioners Emergency Meeting at 5:26 p.m. on Monday, August 16, 2021.

**BOARD OF HEALTH
LEWIS COUNTY, WASHINGTON**

Lindsey R. Pollock, DVM, Chair

Sean D. Swope, Vice Chair

ATTEST:

Sandi Andrus, Clerk of the BOH

Gary Stamper, Member