

**OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

**RESEARCH DIVISION**

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**CITY COUNCIL SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES**

**COVID-19 STATE OF EMERGENCY**

**Remote meeting via teleconference**

**March 31, 2020**

**10:00 a.m.**

**Location:** Remote meeting via teleconference

**In attendance:**

Council Members Scott Wilson (President), Danny Becton, Aaron Bowman, Michael Boylan, Matt Carlucci, LeAnna Cumber, Randy DeFoor, Garrett Dennis, Rory Diamond, Al Ferraro, Terrance Freeman, Reginald Gaffney, Tommy Hazouri, Joyce Morgan, Sam Newby, Ju’Coby Pittman, Brenda Priestly Jackson, Ron Salem, and Randy White

**Also**: Jason Gabriel, Peggy Sidman, Paige Johnston, Shannon Eller – Office of General Counsel; Crystal Shemwell – Legislative Services Division; Mayor Lenny Curry - Mayor’s Office; Cheryl Brown – Council Secretary/Director; Steve Cassada and Melanie Wilkes – Council Support Services; Chief Keith Powers – Fire and Rescue Department; Jeff Clements and Yvonne Mitchell – Council Research Division; Kyle Billy, Kim Taylor, Phillip Peterson – Council Auditor’s Office; Carla Miller and Kirby Oberdorfer – Ethics Office

**Meeting Convened**: 10:00 a.m.

President Wilson called the meeting to order and a roll call of the council members in virtual attendance was taken. President Wilson announced that the standing committees would resume meeting virtually next week on their regular schedule.

President Wilson introduced Mayor Lenny Curry to address the Council and the public regarding the current situation with regard to the COVID-19 virus.

Mayor Curry said that the city has had 163 positive tests for COVID-19 reported as of yesterday. 3,681 tests have been administered at the Stadium Lot J and Prime Osborne Convention Center testing sites as of yesterday. The federal government’s Lot J testing site has dropped the elevated temperature requirement for testing but still requires evidence of respiratory symptoms. Tests are limited to 250 per day due to test kit availability and lab capacity. He noted that the $25 testing fee at the Prime Osborne site is waived if citizens enter the “Here4you” code in the online application process before they go to the site for testing. Mayor Curry noted that he has issued 4 executive orders with regard to the COVID-19 emergency: required social distancing; closure of the public beaches; mandatory work-from-home for everyone for whom that is possible, and the prohibition against hotels and other public accommodations extending existing or taking new reservations except for identified high priority people (medical professionals, first responders, etc.).

A City financial assistance program will be announced next week. The City is partnering with VyStar Credit Union on a $20-30 million program to provide immediate relief for small businesses and for employee retention. The mayor stressed that these are unprecedented times, that stress is peaking for many people because of their employment, social and health conditions, and he urged everyone to use the City’s “coj.net/recoveryresources” web site for information on all available services and programs.

Questions and Answers

Council Member Cumber – how does enforcement of social distancing and stay-at-home work? She’s seen groups still gathering in parks. Mayor Curry - he will look at what extra City resources might be available, and the Sheriff’s Office is breaking up large groups if they are reported.

Council Member Carlucci – what is the current estimate of when we might reach the peak of infections and start seeing a decline in cases, and how do we react when that starts to happen? Mayor Curry – local experts at the hospitals are estimating late April/early May for the peak; we will need to keep social distancing, however, to make that date possible and not extend the crisis. He is keeping close watch on hospital bed availability which seems fairly normal for now. He’s heard speculation about the possibility that the virus might re-emerge in the fall, but that’s a long way off and the country will have to determine what the new normal looks like at that point.

Council Member Ferraro – he’s heard complaints from constituents who haven’t been able to get tested and wondered if there are plans for more testing sites if the current site are insufficient. Mayor Curry – Lot J and Prime Osborn are the only City-affiliated sites; other sites (like Mayo Clinic) are private and depend on your insurance coverage. The testing labs are overwhelmed with the volume of tests they’re being asked to process, so that’s the real problem.

Council Member Ferraro – what is being done about people coming to Florida from other states and potentially bringing the virus with them? Mayor Curry – he applauds Governor DeSantis’ actions in that regard. He issued the hotel reservation limit executive order yesterday and will do what is needed to strengthen that if needed.

Council Member Hazouri – will Jacksonville wait on the Governor to make a total shelter-in-place call or will that be done locally? Mayor Curry – he has looked at the Miami-Dade County order and Jacksonville is pretty much there with regard to limiting travel only to essential businesses. He is still holding that option open if needed. If you can work from home, do it. Code Enforcement is looking at complaints and checking on social distancing at places where on-site work is required.

Council Member Pittman – what can be done for non-profits with relief funds? Mayor Curry – start with the coj.net/recoveryresources page and council members can call the Mayor’s Office for individual advice and assistance.

Council Member Morgan – thank you to the first responders, medical professionals, grocery store workers and everyone else keeping the community running. Are we doing enough testing and could we be doing more? Mayor Curry - Lot J is the federally mandated site and the City did the Prime Osborn site to supplement that. The country is straining at the limits of its testing capacity for now. There really isn’t capacity to do more, except for what the hospitals can do on their own. The federal government has provided 500 fast response test kits to Jacksonville.

Council Member Morgan – is there a list of what is considered non-essential business types? Mayor Curry – yes, the Governor established that list and he will provide it to council members.

Council Member Salem – he’s also seen gatherings in parks and asked how that should be reported. He also asked if City Hall will remain closed through April. Mayor Curry – if you see crowds gathering without proper social distancing, call JSO and report it at 630-0500 (not 911). The call on City Hall reopening will be made depending on how the course of the virus goes – it could be late April, it could be longer depending on what happens. Do the right thing to make it as short as possible.

Council Member Newby thanked everyone for their concern and prayers during his COVID-19 diagnosis. He went to the doctor 5 times before he was tested for COVID-19 because he didn’t have the normal symptoms – how do we overcome that? Mayor Curry – because of the shortage of supplies, we can’t test everybody. Self-isolate if you have any kind of flu symptoms and stay home. There will be more testing capacity coming as suppliers ramp up production.

Council Member Freeman – small businesses are desperate for assistance. How long will it take to get City assistance when the program mentioned earlier is introduced and passed? Will this have any impact on the federal stimulus program, any eligibility conflict? Mayor Curry – 5 days from application to distribution of funds. The City will work with the federal government to make sure there’s no conflict or problem with the federal stimulus program.

Council Member Gaffney – what do the churches need to understand about the rules and how should they proceed? Mayor Curry – the executive order applies to everyone regarding social distancing and maximum number of people congregating, even in church.

Council Member Dennis – it’s good to hear that the state released $10 million in hurricane expense reimbursements to Jacksonville, but how is the City budget looking with these unprecedented challenges? Mayor Curry – it will take a long time to really know the impact. The budget is very strong and fund balances and reserves have been increased over the last few years to provide a cushion, but this virus is going to change the way the world works over the long term. Everything needs to be re-evaluated and re-prioritized to make sure that fundamental needs are met and life gets back to normal.

Council Member DeFoor thanked the Mayor for the good balancing act being done to balance the restrictions needed to protect public health with the need for economic and social life to continue as much as is reasonably possible.

President Wilson said the business assistance package is being developed and will hopefully be introduced as legislation next week. He asked council members to please pose their questions on all legislation ahead of time to the administration so that the virtual meetings can work more efficiently. He also asked them to please be cognizant of what they ask their executive council assistants to do to ensure their health and safety. He gave special thanks to Council Secretary/Director Cheryl Brown, to Steve Cassada and Melanie Wilkes of the Council’s IT staff, and others for pulling together this virtual meeting system. He reminded everyone to support the Chamber of Commerce’s Take-Out Tuesday initiative to support local restaurants.

Mayor Curry noted that we’re all in this together and urged everyone to take care of themselves and of each other. The City will come out of this situation in good shape, but the reality is very grim for lots of people whose businesses have evaporated overnight. He said it will be difficult, but we will get through this together.

Council Member Hazouri said he’s been getting information from Council Auditor Kyle Billy about the budget and encourages council members to pose their own questions to Mr. Billy. He asked Mr. Billy to do a quick white paper for the council about what the budget will look like in the coming months.

**Meeting adjourned:** 10:41 a.m.

Minutes: Jeff Clements, Council Research Division

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3.31.20 Posted 11:30 a.m.