

Mayor's Final Public Address - May 25th COVID-19 Pandemic Update

Good afternoon – The Government of British Columbia's Provincial State of Emergency ends tomorrow, May 26, 2020, at end of day. The state of emergency has allowed the Province to use extraordinary powers under the Emergency Program Act to support the COVID-19 pandemic response. As such, this will 'hopefully' be my final Covid-19 pandemic address. Any further updates will be shared during the Regular Council meetings that will continue virtually. I want to take this time to offer my sincere gratitude to the residents of Sooke, the service organizations, volunteers, businesses, and the frontline and essential workers, who have rallied together over the past few months to support one another. While we have all been in the same storm, I do understand that we have not all been in the same boat – the impact of this pandemic has affected people and families quite differently. The unforeseen challenges, and loss of rhythms, have taken a significant toll on many residents and businesses, and my thoughts have been with you all.

A silver lining, perhaps, has been to see how people have stepped up to support those in need, and the creative ways that people are staying connected with one another – from the wine ninja movement, to banging pots and pans, to online sing-a-longs, to stealthily leaving food/treats on doorsteps – all, very inspiring. It is important to note that while we have entered Phase 2 of the Provincial Restart Plan, we need to continue to be vigilant to help mitigate a "second wave" and ensure forward momentum on our collective recovery.

Passing of former Councillor Sheila Beech:

- Sheila was actively engaged in many local organizations, including the Sooke Literacy Committee, the Sooke Region Tourism Association, and the Sooke Rotary Club, where she was a long-standing member. A frequent contributor to the Sooke Fine Arts Show, she could often be found demonstrating her felt making skills as an artist in residence during the event, quick with a smile and an in-depth explanation of the finer points of her craft.
- Councillor Beech was also very active in our community with the Sooke Rotary Club, Sooke Fine Art Show, Anglican Church, Sooke Community Choir.
- Our deepest condolences to friends and families. Last week's Mirror had her obituary, in lieu of flowers donations can be made to the Sooke Rotary Club and a memorial will be planned and held in the future.

I also wish to express condolences to family and friends of our Snowbird pilot Capt Jennifer Casey who has now returned home to Halifax.

- Casey had been flying with the Snowbirds as part of Operation Inspiration, a cross-country tour with the purpose of lifting people's spirits during the pandemic.
- "Bringing Operation Inspiration to us in that time, I think was profoundly meaningful for her. We owe her a great debt of gratitude for what she gave and what she gave to us as Canadians," said Honourary Lt.-Col Corinne MacLellan, a friend and colleague.
- Her family called it a mission that was "designed for her."

- "Her beautiful smile and positively infectious personality could brighten anyone's day and she proudly served the mission as she flew across our great nation with a team that she adored, the Snowbirds," her family said in a statement last week.

DISTRICT & COUNCIL

Council meetings

- The District is still operating under Ministerial Order M139, meaning that there is no public in attendance at Council meetings. Any public input received for agenda items will be summarized and read into the minutes. Full copies of the correspondence will be provided to all members of Council for consideration in their decision-making process. Email: info@sooke.ca
- Regular Committee of the Whole Meetings recommenced on May 19th and will be held in Council Chamber. Committee of the Whole meetings are on the third Monday of each month at 1:00 pm, unless after a long weekend where the meeting is pushed to Tuesday afternoon.
- Council meetings are happening once again in Council Chambers and are back to the regular schedule of the second and four Monday of each month at 7:00 pm.

District of Sooke Return to Work Plan

- Although the doors to the municipal hall will be open as of June 1st, residents are encouraged to call the municipality, and/or the firehall ahead of time to speak with staff, or book an appointment before dropping in – this pertains to anything other than coming to pay taxes, as staff will have systems and safety measures in place to accommodate the busy tax season. In order to adhere to recommendations and guidelines to eliminate contact where possible, some staff will still be working from home, when feasible. Phoning ahead will ensure that you receive the service you require, staff can advance plan for your meeting, and we can, ultimately, reduce wait times. Using other technology (email, phone, etc) is the preferred communication method, when possible. The Fire Department will continue limiting public access to the firehall as much as possible to limit exposure and protect the health and safety of firefighters.
- For everyone's protection, visitors are asked to be patient and adhere to physical distancing guidelines that have been put in place at the municipal hall. Only two people will be welcomed into the reception area at a time. Residents are encouraged to file the Home Owner Grant (HOG) online, which will be open at the end of this week and pay taxes online.
- Reminder that deferments are being done online with the province now, *not at municipal hall*.
- While the municipal budget experienced a 0% increase, there were increases to our *third-party* tax rates that the District collects on others behalf; so this – as well as your property assessment – will also impact the total of your tax notice.
- I would like to thank the District staff who transitioned to working from home, and to the frontline staff who continued to come into the office. To Parks, Bylaw, Building Safety, Engineering, Wastewater and Fire crews who have been continuing to report to work out in the field – through a lot of unknowns and uncertainty – thank you. Parks staff took on the often-daunting task of keeping our beautiful green spaces and washrooms available, clean and safe during a pandemic – thank you for going above and beyond.

- Parks users are reminded to keep physical distancing while enjoying the parks – and you're your distance from Parks staff as well.
- Playgrounds remain closed at this time and we will look to the Province for guidance on when to reopen them. We are all excited to return to play but in the meantime, we encourage you to explore our beaches and trails.

The Sooke Fire Rescue Drive-By birthday program has been a huge success:

- As of May 31, crews will have completed approximately 117 birthday visits over the past 6+ weeks. Crews have used lights and sirens to brighten birthdays for Sooke residents under 12 and over 75, and often stop to talk with recipients (from a safe distance, of course) or play "Happy Birthday" over the fire truck loudspeakers. Public reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, both in terms of engagement and reaction (from the recipients and also from neighbors and other community members). Emails received and social media posts have been thankful, supportive, and enthusiastic.
- On most days Sooke Fire members accompanied by RCMP and Bylaw – with BC Ambulance joining as available. The Sooke News Mirror published a story on the initiative, and we are appreciative of their support in helping to build awareness of the program.
- The entire initiative has been a positive morale boost internally for the Dept. as well. For example, yesterday when traveling between calls, there were at least a dozen residents who went out of their way to wave, say hi, or positively acknowledge the firefighters. It was a great reminder that we live in a loving, caring community.

Birthday Highlights have been:

- Helping to celebrate the 100th birthday of a long- time Sooke resident
- Parlaying the project into an opportunity to join staff at John Muir and Poirer Elementary Schools during their hosted Drive By – allowing students across Sooke to see their favorite teachers.

Sooke Fire and Sooke Emergency Program Updates:

- **The 2020 recruit training program** has continued with an altered delivery model to allow recruits to continue their training in a responsible, social distancing fashion. The class has now been split up into two groups – this has placed additional responsibility on the Fire Department but allows for new recruits to maintain their training momentum.
- **Sooke Emergency Support Services (ESS) and the Sooke Emergency Radio Group (SERG)** – both of these volunteer groups are part of the Sooke Emergency Program. Behind the scenes, both teams meet, plan, and train to provide critical supports to residents during a major incident. The dedication of these volunteer teams – and their willingness to step up during difficult times, is most appreciated. If this event has inspired anyone to get formally involved during an emergency, both groups welcome new volunteers. Contact the Fire Department, if interested.
- **Reminder that Backyard Burning is still prohibited**, small campfires in contained rings, no bigger than two feet across are still permitted – clean, split wood only, no garden waste. There are many residents who are still burning yard debris – please compost your debris responsibly – or utilize the services of one of the Sooke businesses.

Victoria Regional Transit:

The BC Transit office will be open to the public to purchase transit passes and staff will be prepared to refund March monthly passes by either a pro rated cash refund or 13 days worth of travel based on fare collection ceasing on March 19th or they can request an exchange of the March monthly pass for a future monthly pass. April monthly passes can also be exchanged for a future monthly pass or a full refund. These refunds will be available until August 31, 2020 at the BC Transit Office. There will be information going out to the public by media release and communication on all social media platforms. This is a solution that allows regular transit users to benefit from the receipt of a new monthly pass to encourage continued use of transit, or for those that are no longer commuting due to remote working arrangements or other impacts of COVID-19 to access a cash refund if needed. We appreciate that transit users have been waiting patiently to hear on refunds or exchanges for paid transit passes and are pleased to be able to now offer a solution.

For ProPASS, we contacted the administrators at the partnering organizations at the time of fare collection stopping to cease payroll deductions as of that point. They are to resume payroll deductions as of June 1, so no refunds will be required. U-PASS programs are being offered on an opt-in basis for the summer, with us looking to arrange meetings in the coming weeks with the institution and student society partners to discuss plans for the fall.

Capital Regional District Board – has been meeting via skype or other means every 2 weeks. 9 Board members are able to now attend in person, others can video or call into the meeting. Committee meetings and a return to the regular board schedule will start in July.

SEAPARC Temporary Shelter for vulnerable Sooke residents

- An exit plan is currently being developed, as the arena space is only available until the end of June.
- Thankfully, there has been a great reduction in community members indicating their displeasure with the shelter. This has made it more comfortable onsite for the residents. Residents who have been using the shelter are very appreciative for the support. They have been active in picking up garbage/litter from the bushes and roadsides within that area.
- With appreciation to all of the groups who came together to make this happen.

BC'S RESTART PLAN – now in PHASE 2

- **Take the provincial government's 'BC Covid-19 Speak' survey** – a population health survey to elicit citizen experience, knowledge and actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey is the first of several activities that will strengthen pandemic response and understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 (social, economic, mental wellness and community wellness).
- **The Government of Canada has launched a web-based benefits finder tool**, "Find financial help during COVID-19", on canada.ca/coronavirusbenefits, to help people living in Canada determine

which government benefits programs best meet their needs. If you are in financial need, please explore this resource.

- **Residents are asked to remain vigilant** by continuing to: wash hands, stay home when sick, clean surfaces – and stay 6 feet away from others, whenever possible. This applies from now until Phase 4 of BC's Restart Plan.
- **Businesses, services and restaurants** are developing plans to re-open safely as part of Phase 2, as long as they can meet sufficient distancing measures. Our staff is exploring options on how we can support our businesses.
- **Schools and childcare** – schools are expected to return to a 'new normal' by September 2020. A gradual approach to getting back to regular classroom instruction has been presented. A voluntary, partial return to safely get some kids back to school has been announced.
- **Parks** – all Sooke Parks play structures remain closed, until further guidance on cleaning and use can be established by the Province.
- The provincial campsite reservations system is now open, with camping opportunities starting on start June 1st.

I will now close with Bonnie Henry's famous quote, "be kind, be calm, be safe".

Take good care Sooke.