



The Chairman's Corner

by

Matt B. Murell

Matt.Murell@ColumbiacountyNY.com

A LOOK BACK AT COVID-19/PART ONE (part 1 of 3)

1-14-21

As things developed in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, I think it's fair to say that no one really knew what was going on with this thing that had suddenly invaded all of our lives.

Those of us in local government were no different. It didn't take long before the realization that, given the information we were receiving in regards to the virus, that the county budget would soon be in shambles if immediate measures were not taken. Early revenue shortfall estimates by county Treasurer PJ Keeler ranged as high as \$20 million.

Keep in mind that the county budget is required by state law to be a balanced document – deficits are not an option. County leadership needed to work swiftly, efficiently and creatively to balance the budget and hopefully not lose jobs.

Early economic steps included a wide-ranging county Board of Supervisors resolution featuring emergency cost-cutting measures totaling \$9.96 million. Among these reductions: 20 percent contractual, equipment, road work, capital expenditures, and 20 percent from outside agencies, as well as a hiring freeze, a pause in the summer intern program, a 13-pay period one-day furlough, the use of tax stabilization funds, and a voluntary full furlough plan.

Meanwhile, the county Department of Health's battle with the coronavirus was on.

On Monday, March 23, DOH Director Jack Mabb reported that 19 individuals had tested positive for COVID-19 in Columbia County, with no hospitalizations from the disease to date.

Contrast that with last Wednesday, December 30, when 41 county individuals were reported that day as newly positive cases. On the final day of 2020, the county DOH reported 215 active cases in the county, and 16 were hospitalized, with one individual in the ICU. In addition, 2020 saw 1,667 individuals overall had tested positive -- 49 individuals in the county had died from the virus.

In March, test kits for the coronavirus were scarce, to say the least, and the supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was not in much better shape. The county has been extremely fortunate in that regard, as many have chipped in with donations of money to first obtain testing kits for DOH use, then to help with the costs associated with the upcoming vaccination process. As of the end of the year, nearly \$50,000 had been donated by members of the public. Ongoing donations of PPE have been equally generous.

During the last week of March, it was reported that four residents of the Pine Haven Nursing & Rehabilitation facility in Philmont had tested positive for COVID-19. In this same time frame, my office continued to urge people who migrated from outside the county to Columbia County to self-quarantine for 14 days.

April kicked off with the extension – in keeping with New York State guidelines -- of the closure of public county buildings through April 17. While proceeding in two-week increments, the thinking at the time was that this situation could continue through the end of the month or beyond.

Next time, I'll pick up here, as we move into April.