



Region 7 – COVID-19 – County Response
Meeting Notes
Asotin – Columbia – Garfield – Walla Walla – Whitman Counties

Tuesday, April 28, 2020
10:00 am – 11:30 am

FACILITATORS: Jaime Bodden, WSALPHO and Mellani McAleenan, WSAC

ELECTED COUNTY OFFICIALS & STAFF IN ATTENDANCE:

Asotin

Chris Seubert, Commissioner & Brian Shinn, Commissioner

Columbia

Charles Amerein, Commissioner & Mike Talbott, Commissioner

Garfield

Bob Johnson, Commissioner

Walla Walla

Meghan Debolt, Director – Walla Walla County Health & Human Services; Jim Johnson, Commissioner & Greg Tompkins, Commissioner

Whitman

Michael Largent, Commissioner

Legislator(s):

Rep. Mary Dye

Legislative Staff:

James Crandall, Noha Mahgoub, Brandon Popovac, Kellen Wright

LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE

Meghan Debolt – Director – Walla Walla County Health & Human Services

- Immediately began planning after hearing about the Seattle cases.
- Had their first case on February 28th – individual showed COVID symptoms – staff knew exactly what to do as preparation was everything.
- Staff engaged with emergency management and health systems (Providence).
- Began monitoring returning travelers.
- Current cases have increased within the last two weeks – daily case count is climbing.
- Consistent messaging with employers on what's been happening in the county and how do we move forward?

LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE – cont.

- Testing is vital – over 1,000 individuals were tested at Tyson Meats.
- With future testing – Providence will be able to test at least 300 individuals a day.
- Walla Walla Commissioners approved 3 additional staff positions to assist with pandemic through December.

CHALLENGES AND LOOKING AHEAD

- Language barrier within the communities.
- Opening businesses in a safe and responsible manner.

IMPACT ON COUNTY FUNCTIONS

Asotin:

- County buildings have been shutdown to the public – when do we open again?
- Increased numbers of unemployment, which will have a strong economic impact on the community.
- Cash reserves have been distributed to aid businesses.
- 17 COVID cases.
- Would like to reopen the courthouse and the annex building, but when and how?
- CARES money – when will we see it? Would like guidance and the requirements.

Columbia:

- Loss of revenues – what cuts will be made from the county budget?
- Anxious to hear about the CARE funding.
- COVID cases have been very low.

Garfield:

- Currently no COVID cases in the county.
- Would like to reopen businesses but in a safe and careful way.
- Loss of revenues from sales and fuel taxes.

Walla Walla:

- All departments have been instructed to look at a 5% reduction in their budgets.
- Added expense - laptops for staff working remotely.
- Courthouse hours have been reduced.
- 1.5 – 2 million dollars will possibly be cut in the county budget – difficult decisions will be made, as there are no good options.

Whitman County:

- Severe budget issues.
- Currently looking at cost drivers – how do we continue to provide basic services?
- When students return to the university – very concerned about the “second wave” – how do we prepare?

ANTICIPATED NEEDS MOVING FORWARD

Asotin:

- Very concerned about the loss of revenue for sales tax.
- Would like to see unfunded mandate rules relaxed during this time.
- Anticipating salary cuts for staff – preparing for the worst.
- Would like to see businesses reopen in a “safe way” to restart the economy.
- Assistance needed for the unemployed, as well as unopened businesses.

Columbia:

- With the loss of gas taxes, road maintenance and county infrastructure will be directly affected.
- Will need to look at cuts for the long term.
- Food shortages – food going to waste for the farmers and the businesses they supply.
- Possibly early retirement for employees.

Garfield:

- Serious concerns with the loss of revenue from sales and fuel taxes.

Walla Walla

- \$700,000 in reduced revenues from the gas tax.
- Employees are concerned about returning to a safe work environment, as well as the courthouse – what precautions have been taken?
- What is the liability for the employer/county if someone becomes ill?

Whitman:

- Concerns about daily duties – will they be difficult to perform?
- The “unknowns” make it difficult to make decisions.
- Anticipation for 2021 – will there be layoffs/furloughs?
- Would like direction/instruction with the CARE funding.
- County budget is SCARY!