

Message from the Mayor, September 16, 2020

Rec sports resume
after coronavirus spike

The Township's athletic fields have re-opened as of Wednesday and all recreation sports are back in action after a coronavirus incident that closed Chatham High School, canceled all high school extra-curricular activities, and sparked a contact tracing effort across all age groups.

The decision by Chatham Township and Chatham Borough last Friday, September 11, to temporarily close municipal athletic facilities to all recreation sports programs has been the topic of much concern on facebook. A number of people thought the temporary shutdown was an over-reaction. The purpose of this Mayor's Message is to explain what happened and why.

Most Township residents know that ill-advised partying by students in early September resulted in several positive Covid-19 cases at Chatham High School, forcing it to halt in-person classes and all extra-curricular activities for two weeks. All those who were in contact with the infected high school students, including their siblings across all age groups, were advised to quarantine for two weeks.

What many people don't know is the cascade of events triggered by those parties.

On Friday, September 11, our Health Department reported 5 new cases of coronavirus. That is compared to a total of 6 positive cases reported during the entire month of August.

These new numbers were a combination of positive test results and a contact tracing campaign as the Health Departments serving both municipalities attempted to reach more than 70 people exposed to those who were infected. Many parents and students cooperated and provided vital information to the contact tracers. More than a few did not cooperate.

Not knowing how high the surge of infections might take us, both Chatham Township and Chatham Borough decided to temporarily halt recreation sports programs until we could get a handle on the numbers. That decision was supported by evidence when our Township Health Officer reported 6 new cases on Monday, bringing the Township total to 11.

The Joint Recreation Advisory Committee met with municipal and health officials on Monday night. Our Township health officer advised that the temporary shutdown had been prudent and justified. He was cautiously optimistic the contact tracing effort had identified the spread of the infection, but he recommended waiting another day before taking action. The Joint Rec Committee agreed.

The numbers on Tuesday showed 1 more positive case in the Township, bringing the total to 12 in five days. Based on the flattening curve of new infections, both municipalities re-opened their athletic facilities with the approval of their respective health officers.

On Wednesday, September 16, the number of new cases jumped again with 9, bringing the six-day total to 21 which is two-and-a-half times the total for all of August. If these numbers continue to rise, additional actions and possible shutdowns will have to be considered.

I understand that a five-day interruption in recreation sports is an inconvenience, but people need to keep it in perspective.

A five-day pause in recreation programs is insignificant compared to every other impact of the pandemic.

Chatham Township has had 33 deaths since the start of the pandemic and 175 cases. Many of those cases have been minor but some have been life-threatening and doctors still don't know what long-term damage Covid-19 can cause.

A few hours of ill-advised partying has undone the school district's entire summer of planning, preparing and investing for the start of classes in September. A five-day pause in recreation sports pales into insignificance by comparison.

And those who chose not to cooperate with the contact tracing effort should reconsider their actions. Rec programs were able to reopen after five days only because people cooperated to help determine the spread of the infection. Less cooperation could have resulted in a longer shutdown. The goal of the Borough, Township, and the Joint Recreation Committee is to ensure that all participants – coaches, parents, referees and players – have a safe, healthy and positive experience. Safety was, and always will be, our highest priority.

We have not yet defeated the pandemic, but locally we have made significant progress to control it due to the efforts and sacrifices of many, many residents. A five-day pause in recreation sports is nothing compared to the past six months of self-quarantine and careful behaviors. We don't want to undo all that effort with a few thoughtless acts.

Remember to wear your mask and to keep a safe social distance. These simple precautions work. Wash your hands frequently, stay home when feeling ill, and contact your physician if symptoms begin to escalate.

Be careful, exercise good judgment and stay safe.

Michael Kelly,

Chatham Township Mayor