

We're from the government, and we really *are* here to help

By Bob Yates
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It's not often that you write something, knowing that, by the time it's read a few hours later, it will have been made partially inaccurate by the rapid occurrence of events. So, it is with that caution that I offer this special edition of the *Boulder Bulletin*, to provide you with as accurate information as I have as of 5:00 pm on Wednesday, March 18, but also to direct you in this article to places where you can get up-to-the-hour facts and resources.

Let me start by saying that you should know that we are fortunate to have working for the city some of the smartest and most dedicated people, inside or outside of government. That includes our city manager, Jane Brautigam, her deputies, the city department heads, and the city employees working around the clock to ensure that our streets, homes, and businesses are safe, our water is clean, and those in need are served. Many of us have the luxury of *de facto* home quarantine, but these public servants, along with our doctors and other health care workers, still show up for work every day to serve us, regardless of the personal risk to themselves. The next time you see a cop, a firefighter, an EMT, a utility worker, a trash collector, a nurse, or a grocery store or pharmacy clerk, thank them for keeping our community clean, safe, and healthy.

Because we have so many talented people on city staff who are so well trained and prepared, it was very natural for them to shift to emergency mode over the last few days and to prioritize what needs to be done to protect our community. On Friday, March 13, the city closed all libraries, recreation centers, and senior centers, and cancelled the meetings of all city boards, except city council. On Saturday, March 14, the city manager declared a local disaster emergency, providing the city the tools necessary to protect public health and safety and apply for state and federal aid. On Sunday, March 15, the city closed all municipal buildings and sent home all city employees whose jobs allow them to work remotely. On the morning of Monday, March 16, the city manager issued an order banning gatherings on any public property of more than 20 people, which was subsequently reduced to gatherings of 10 or more. On the evening of Monday, March 16, city council held an emergency special meeting to ratify the city manager's actions and to extend her authority. That night, city council was prepared to impose a city ban on restaurants, bars, theaters, and gyms, but the governor issued such an order statewide 30 minutes before city council met. On Tuesday, March 17, the city shifted the locations where homelessness services are provided in order to decrease the risk of infection and spread among that population. Further actions to protect public health will be taken as and when warranted.

Reports of these actions, together with resources for information and assistance, can be found on the city's COVID-19 webpage, located [here](#). The webpage is updated throughout the day, every day, as information becomes available. It is published in English and Spanish, there is information on how to access basic services, there is special information for businesses, there are fact sheets and FAQs, and there are links to more than a dozen resources, including county, state, and federal public health websites, Xcel Energy, Western Disposal, and nonprofits serving the community, such as Meals on Wheels and the Community Foundation.

In parallel with these public actions, teams of city employees are meeting daily with their partners in the county, state, and federal government, along with business leaders, nonprofit service providers, and schools and universities. These include a team led by the city's head of Housing and Human Services, Kurt Firnhaber, which is managing services provided to individuals experiencing homelessness, as well as exploring ways to reduce the risk of eviction for residents who have lost employment income. Another team, led by the city's head of Community Vitality, Yvette Bowden, and Boulder Chamber president, John Tayer, are working on efforts to soften the blow to businesses affected by closures, including through local, state, and federal assistance, and by appealing to commercial landlords to ease rent collections. The city's finance team, led by CFO Cheryl Patelli and Budget Director Kady Doelling, are forecasting the impact of reduced city tax revenues and prioritizing the funding of essential city services. The city's policy advisor, Carl Castillo, is working with state and federal officials to free up financial aid to the city, to individuals, and to businesses. Our mayor, Sam Weaver, and my city council colleagues have been involved in these activities and have demonstrated the calm and competent leadership our community expects and needs. I am proud of them all.

All of these actions are being taken with the guidance and advice of our public health experts. Our lead agency is Boulder County Public Health, which has been providing Boulder and the other communities in the county with up-to-the minute information, health and safety guidance, and coordination with the state and federal governments. In addition, we have been conferring with the administration of Boulder Community Health, your locally-governed nonprofit community hospital at Foothills and Arapahoe. Boulder County Public Health executive director Jeff Zayach and hospital CEO Dr. Rob Vissers briefed city council at a specially-called emergency council meeting on Monday night. They reassured us that the hospital has sufficient space, supplies, equipment, and personnel to address current demand for critical health care services. Dr. Vissers reminded us that, while the cause of the illness is different, the symptoms and treatments are consistent with what the hospital deals with on a regular basis for influenza and pneumonia, and that their staff is well-trained and experienced to deal with the current outbreak. To be ready for an anticipated increase in critically-ill patients, elective care and surgeries at the hospital have been postponed, and the hospital and Boulder County Public Health are prepared to activate well-established service expansion plans and protocols, should additional space or care become necessary. You can hear the thorough Monday evening briefing at the videotape of the city council meeting found [here](#), and you can read the most current information from the hospital [here](#).

Some helpful residents have suggested that the former hospital building on Broadway, now owned by the city, be activated for patient care or as a quarantine site. While the building may appear from the outside as it always has, internally the building has been largely deconstructed in preparation for demolition. Electrical and heating systems have been removed, walls torn down, and plumbing and sanitation facilities eliminated. I recently toured the building (with the required hardhat) and I can assure you that it would take many months and many millions of dollars to restore the building to habitability. If needed, we have far better options—available for immediate occupancy—including at the city's currently-closed recreation centers and the Boulder County Fairgrounds.

Your city council is working every day to support our city staff and to serve as a conduit for information to our residents. The [piece](#) that Mayor Sam Weaver and councilmember Mary Young published in Sunday's *Daily Camera* was timely and reassuring. Council members have been responding to resident requests for information and offers of assistance. I am sending between 50 and 100 emails a day in response to residents, and I know that my council colleagues are doing likewise. We have divvied up responsibilities and we are jumping on conference calls when we can be of assistance (I was on 20 calls on Tuesday alone). We are in close communication with our city manager and her staff, providing advice and counsel when helpful. City council members receive a comprehensive briefing from the city manager every evening. In addition to Monday's emergency council meeting, we have called two special council meetings for Tuesday, March 24, and Tuesday, March 31 (we were supposed to be off until April 7 for spring break, but, of course, that has been cancelled). The agendas for those emergency council meetings remain fluid as the situations unfold, but will include, at a minimum, further briefings from public health officials so that the community will have current information. For safety reasons, city council chambers have been closed to the public and, in any event, council members will be largely participating remotely through audio or video conferencing. Of course, our city council meetings will still be open for live public viewing on Channel 8 on TV and [online](#), and we have made arrangements to ensure that the press has complete access to all of our proceedings. Now, more than ever, we must be transparent and accessible, even if that means by electronic participation.

While Dr. Vissers of Boulder Community Health advised city council that the hospital has the space, resources, and personnel to address the current needs, this could change rapidly if the demand for critical care spikes. As of this writing at 5:00 pm on Wednesday, March 18, there have been 13 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Boulder County, with none of them reported as requiring critical care, and with no related deaths reported. Many more people are probably already unknowingly infected and the instances of confirmed cases will undoubtedly increase over the coming days and weeks, with local deaths possible. As long as the increase of people needing medical care is slow, Dr. Vissers believes that the hospital can handle the patient load. But, his plea to our community is for us to help slow the spread of the disease, so that any new cases come in gradually over a more lengthy period of time, allowing the hospital to treat and discharge affected patients before new ones arrive. Dr. Vissers told us that we can all do our part in flattening the curve of infection in Boulder by practicing the following behaviors:

- Stay home, unless needed for a critical job or volunteer functions, or shopping for necessary food, supplies, or medicine.
- If in the presence of someone outside of your household, keep a distance of at least six feet.
- Wash hands frequently, even when at home, and avoid touching your face.
- Unless requiring immediate, life-saving medical attention, report illness to your doctor by phone to receive direction on further actions.

- Read advice on staying healthy and avoiding spreading the virus to others at the websites for [Boulder County Public Health](#), the [Colorado Department of Public Health](#), and the [Centers for Disease Control](#).

I had the opportunity on Tuesday to join the BVSD emergency food distribution at Crestview Elementary School, at which 250 families received several meals of healthy, fresh food and produce. It was part of a district-wide program under which the School Food Project distributed meals to 2,000 families that day. The leader, Ann Cooper (“Chef Ann”), told me that the distribution will be repeated on Thursday, March 19, at which they hope to increase the distribution to 3,000 families. You can learn more about the BVSD food distribution and how you can help at [this site](#). Also consider supporting Meals on Wheels as they work to feed homebound seniors, as well as Emergency Family Assistance Association as they support families with children, with more information [here](#) and [here](#).

We will get through this. We have a strong, resilient community. We have many resources and significant reserves. We have talented and dedicated public servants. We have a wide and sturdy safety net woven by a well-funded local government and compassionate nonprofits. We are smart enough to listen to the health care experts and follow their advice. We will not allow rumors and false information to be spread. We have planned for something like this for years, and we will implement those plans competently. We will take information from reliable sources seriously and we will act on that information accordingly and proportionately. We will support our local small businesses, even if we cannot visit them for a while. We will generously contribute to charities who are helping the poor, the infirm, and the disadvantaged. We will gratefully accept helpful suggestions and offers of assistance. We will remain calm. We will reassure and comfort those experiencing anxiety and stress. We will care for our neighbors. We will be kind to our family members. And, when this is over, we will be a stronger, more cohesive, more compassionate, and more caring community.