

Kemp...from Page 1A

or restaurant food pickup, exercise, though people must practice social distancing if appointments and outdoor they leave their homes, i.e. be

able to maintain at least 6 feet between themselves and others with whom they do not live.

Among other things, “Essential Services” also include trips to support dependent family members and for children to gain access to public internet to meet “educational obligations.”

Intriguingly, there appear to be no distance restrictions on “Necessary Travel,” including for exercise-related activities, which seemingly translates to a tacit encouragement of discretionary travel between counties and across the state to beaches, parks and other outdoor public spaces not required for personal exercise.

Adding to this impression, the Department of Natural Resources State Parks Division has decided to keep state parks open to all visitors, and parks were still open by press time Monday.

Social distancing is being enforced, and officials are now advising people to “please consider staying in your community and visiting your local park.”

Still, the question remains – and has for weeks now – as to whether or not the state is actually following CDC and President Donald Trump’s guidelines advising people to “avoid discretionary travel,” which would presumably include trips to Georgia’s parks and beaches.

The president’s coronavirus response team, headed up by Dr. Deborah Birx, is heavily advocating that people stay home to avoid transmitting or catching the

virus during this crucial time, as health experts believe the virus’ spread is still ramping up in the U.S.

In a press conference Saturday, Dr. Birx even went so far as to say people should avoid travel for other things deemed “essential” by Kemp, to say nothing of exercise.

“The next two weeks are extraordinarily important,” Dr. Birx said. “This is the moment to not be going to the grocery store, not going to the pharmacy, but doing everything you can to keep your family and your friends safe, and that means everybody doing the 6-foot distancing, washing their hands.”

Opposition to leisure travel allowed by Kemp has been widespread across the state, and particularly so in Union and surrounding counties due to Vogel State Park continuing to welcome thousands of visitors in recent weeks into mountain communities.

The frustration people are feeling has only been compounded by Kemp’s decision to suspend all county and city ordinances responding to COVID-19, resulting in the re-opening of many hotels, vacation rentals and campgrounds in various communities.

In sharp contrast, the U.S. Forest Service, which is federal, has closed Helton Creek Falls and access points to the Appalachian Trail to discourage travel-related virus spread between communities and encourage social distancing.

Kemp’s order also identifies “Critical” versus “Noncritical” infrastructure, establishing requirements for businesses and organizations to follow if they want to continue serving the public, such as monitoring employee health, sanitizing the workplace and maintaining space between workers.

In defining “Critical Infrastructure,” Kemp refers to an extensive list compiled by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. To read the full document issued by Homeland Security, visit <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce>.

Most businesses and organizations can remain open under Kemp’s shelter-in-place order if they follow the proper requirements, though no business, organization or local government may allow more than 10 people to gather in a single location unless they can maintain at least 6 feet apart.

To review the list of requirements and explore “Critical” versus “Noncritical” infrastructure, check out the governor’s website at gov.georgia.gov. Look for the press release titled “Governor Kemp Issues Shelter in Place Order,” which includes many supporting documents.

The overarching goal of the order is to keep people from coming into unnecessary contact with one another.

Importantly, the order attempts to address the growing calls of late from local governments around the state looking for a more uniform approach to combatting the virus, as mitigation efforts have varied widely from municipality to municipality, with some areas doing little to slow the spread and others closing businesses and instituting curfews.

Similar to what many counties and cities have already done, including Union County and Blairsville, the order closes businesses requiring prolonged physical contact, such as gyms, barber shops and nail salons.

Bars and nightclubs, originally closed under a previous executive order from March 23, will remain closed throughout the shelter-in-place order, and newly, the order closes places like movie theaters, as well as the interior dining areas of restaurants, which have been closed through local ordinance for some time now.

As mentioned above, the order supersedes all local ordinances and prevents counties and cities from adopting “more restrictive or less restrictive” measures, effectively stripping local governments of the ability to mitigate virus impacts on a community by community

basis.

For example, the Blairsville City Council amended its emergency ordinance last week to include a shelter-in-place order for city residents. The amendment also ordered hotels, vacation rentals and campgrounds to close to discourage the movement of people who might spread the virus.

Kemp’s order, however, suspends the city’s ability to close hotels and motels. By extension, all local ordinances closing or altering the functions of vacation rentals and campgrounds have been suspended, along with any other measures not specifically mentioned in the state order.

Once Kemp’s shelter-in-place order expires after April 13, unless it is extended, all local ordinances that have not yet expired will go back into effect.

On Thursday, Kemp signed an additional order giving local sheriffs’ offices and deputies the ability to enforce his order by closing businesses and organizations that don’t comply. Furthermore, anyone convicted of violating the order will be found guilty of a misdemeanor.

The order also enshrines Second Amendment protections around the state, guaranteeing that the sale, dispensation and transportation of firearms and ammunition may continue unimpeded.

For CDC guidelines, visit coronavirus.gov. To follow the virus’ spread via the Georgia Department of Public Health COVID-19 Daily Status Report, visit <https://dph.georgia.gov>. To find more local resources, check out <https://www.unioncountyyga.gov>.

Absentee Ballots...from Page 1A

ballots may be entered for folks not wanting to mail them.

This measure is meant to limit people gathering for voting and thereby spreading the novel coronavirus, which has already caused the March 24 Presidential Preference Primary to be canceled.

Voters who did not get a chance to vote in the Presidential Preference Primary will be able to vote for their presidential candidate of choice during the upcoming May 19 primary.

To reiterate, as voting often translates to people gathering in groups, elections can make it easy for the deadly COVID-19 virus to spread to voters and poll workers alike, so the state is preemptively mailing absentee ballots in anticipation of a surge in their use for the upcoming election.

There has been some discussion of moving the May 19 election to the summer to give the state more time to flatten the curve of infection from the virus, though Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger has said that state law would have to be changed to accomplish this.

“I execute elections, I don’t create them,” Raffensperger said. “If the leadership of the General Assembly and the governor wants to hold the election on May 19, we will support them and do our best to make it happen efficiently, safely and accurately.”

“If the General Assembly and the governor wants to move the election to June or July, we will support them in that too.”

Churches...from Page 1A

wants to talk to a pastor, we are there for them to talk to. We have had more attendees online than we have had in services leading up to this.”

Churches with youth programs are finding the change easier, since younger audiences are usually more tech savvy and have fewer problems setting up digital meeting platforms.

This allows churches to connect with young people and to spread their messages in this time where people may be worried.

For older community members, churches are working to find ways to connect with them to make sure they are also staying safe, whether through online platforms or phone calls.

“We are recording our services on Thursday, and they go out to people on Sunday morning,” said Pastor Jerry Helton at House of Prayer. “Our youth are doing small groups on Zoom. We started a devotion on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings live on Facebook and YouTube.”

“We are trying to call and stay in contact with people that can’t get online and watch us. We are trying to do something special for them and stay in touch with our community. That is what we are encouraging in

our church.”

House of Prayer also has a food bank that will remain operational throughout the shelter-in-place order, though the church has altered procedures for the safety of volunteers and those being served.

“Our food bank is open on Monday and Wednesday, and our produce on Monday, Wednesday and Friday,” Helton said. “We have people drive up, and we bring them the food. Our people wear gloves and stay safe to avoid any form of contact.”

“Our clothing ministry is by appointment only; if someone needs clothes, then they can call. We have a soup kitchen on Wednesdays, and we usually have 35 to 50 people that show up for lunch.”

“It felt like it was important to maintain this because we have a lot of elderly people that are with us. We modified that so they drive up, and we give it to them in boxes for them to take home. These outreaches in the community we have felt are essential to keep going.”

The food bank for House of Prayer is open on Monday and Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., with the soup kitchen occurring every Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 12 p.m.