

COVID-19...from Page 1A



Ingles is one of the many businesses in Blairsville where patrons are taking extra precautions to ward off COVID-19.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

when ill; wear facial coverings around others; steer clear of sick people; cover coughs and sneezes; clean and disinfect surfaces and regularly used items. For more information, visit [CDC.gov](https://www.cdc.gov).

Here in Georgia, Gov. Brian Kemp continued to underscore the seriousness of the situation by extending his statewide shelter-in-place order through April 30. The original order began April 3 and was set to expire after April 13.

“All of the provisions of the statewide shelter-in-place order will remain in effect,” Kemp said in his April 8 news conference. “I want to thank everyone who has followed these directives; I certainly applaud your patience.”

He also extended the state’s Public Health State of Emergency through May 13, which requires the Department of Public Health to compel “certain individuals with an increased risk of complications from COVID-19 to isolate, quarantine or shelter in place.”

Additionally, he signed yet another executive order closing a limited number of “Vacation Rentals” through April 30.

His decision to shut some short-term rental properties came after conversations with Georgians and local leaders, many of whom have expressed their concerns that the state was becoming a “vacation destination,” Kemp said.

The executive order targeting vacation rentals seems to take aim specifically at Airbnb-type arrangements,

prohibiting rentals wherein residential property owners lease their properties to private persons through third-party brokers for terms less than 30 days.

Explicitly excluded in the order are hotels, meaning buildings that have “five or more hotel rooms under common ownership.” Also excluded are motels, extended stay hotels, campgrounds, and “purely commercial transactions.”

All state, county and local law enforcement officers are authorized to enforce the order, with violations being considered misdemeanors. However, no law enforcement officer or any other official may “dispossess or evict occupants of Vacation Rentals to enforce this order.”

Kemp has justified his decision to keep public recreation areas open by saying people appear to be following social distancing guidelines on beaches and in state parks, and he said it’s important for residents to have exercise outlets, especially since his shelter-in-place order closed gyms.

Much of the criticism surrounding keeping state parks open stems from local communities’ fears of exposure to COVID-19 by out-of-town visitors, as well as potential exhaustion of local resources such as groceries, supplies, first responders, hospital beds, etc., by people traveling for simple leisure and exercise.

The CDC and President Donald Trump have advised Americans to “avoid discretionary travel,” which

would presumably include leisure travel. The president’s Coronavirus Task Force has even asked people to avoid travel of any kind in the short term.

Multiple news sites, including the Chattanooga Times Free Press, reported over the weekend that DNR Commissioner Mark Williams decided Saturday to close Cloudland Canyon State Park after flying over in a helicopter during a pre-arranged visit and seeing traffic backed up in and out of the park.

Williams will reportedly be meeting with the governor this week to decide whether or not to continue keeping state parks open, including Vogel in Union County.

Cloudland Canyon is in Dade County, which is one of the signatory counties included in a letter by commissioners of 12 North Georgia counties submitted to Kemp last week asking that state parks be shut down to limit travel-related spread of COVID-19 amid the statewide shelter-in-place order.

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris should be counted among the various local leaders pressing for greater restrictions on travel between communities, as he was one of the 12 commissioners to sign the letter to Kemp.

Nearly all state parks remained open at press time. For status updates on DNR State Parks, visit [gastateparks.org/alerts](https://www.gastateparks.org/alerts).

Addressing another issue, Kemp has expressed his reluctance to close churches amid complaints that many worshippers have not been complying with social distancing guidelines, though he did ask church leaders and parishioners on Good Friday to abide by the shelter-in-place order.

“To all Georgians attending religious services this weekend or celebrating Easter this Sunday, I am pleading with you to not attend any services in person,” Kemp said.

Under the order, no more than 10 people are allowed to gather in a single location, including at churches and in businesses, unless social distancing of at least 6 feet between people can be maintained at all times, with exceptions for individuals living together and entities defined as “Critical Infrastructure” by the order.

Also last week, Kemp

activated another 1,000 Georgia National Guard troops “to assist in the COVID-19 emergency response,” bringing the total number of active troops to 3,000.

So far, the troops have been supporting “medical assistance teams, foodbank operations, isolation facilities and staffing the Georgia Emergency Management Agency’s State Operations Center in Atlanta,” according to [MilitaryTimes.com](https://www.militarytimes.com).

In effect since April 3, the shelter-in-place order requires residents and visitors of the state to remain in their residences and take “every possible precaution to limit social interaction to prevent the spread or infection of COVID-19.”

People are allowed to travel for things like work, groceries, medicine, takeout food, doctor’s appointments and exercise, though they must practice social distancing if they leave their homes.

Among other things, people may also travel to support dependent family members and for children to gain access to public internet to meet “educational obligations,” as school campuses have been closed for the remainder of the year.

The interior dining areas of restaurants remain closed, and other than certain short-term rentals, as well as businesses expressly closed by the governor – places requiring close physical proximity like movie theaters, bars, gyms, barber shops, nail salons, etc. – most businesses may continue to operate provided they follow specific guidelines established by the state.

Kemp has signed an executive order giving local sheriffs’ offices and deputies the ability to enforce the shelter-in-place order by closing businesses and organizations that don’t comply. Anyone convicted of violating the order will be guilty of a misdemeanor.

The original shelter-in-place order also enshrined Second Amendment protections around the state, guaranteeing

that the sale, dispensation and transportation of firearms and ammunition may continue unimpeded.

Notably, the April 3 order resulted in the suspension of all local ordinances responding to COVID-19, thereby preventing counties and cities from adopting “more restrictive or less restrictive” measures to mitigate virus impacts at the local level.

For example, the Blairsville City Council amended its emergency ordinance two weeks ago to close hotels, vacation rentals and campgrounds to discourage the movement of people who might spread the virus. Gov.

Kemp’s order negated the city’s local measures.

To read “Critical” versus “Noncritical” infrastructure guidelines for businesses staying open, as well as all the recently signed executive orders, visit Kemp’s website at <https://www.governor.kemp.ga.gov/execution/2020-executive-orders>.

For CDC guidelines, visit www.cdc.gov/coronavirus. 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.unioncountygov.com>.

Primary Election...from Page 1A

9,” Raffensperger said. “This decision allows our office and county election officials to continue to put in place contingency plans to ensure that voting can be safe and secure when in-person voting begins, and (it) prioritizes the health and safety of voters, county election officials and poll workers.”

Throughout this crisis, the Secretary of State’s Office has been in close contact with county election officials across the state.

In recent weeks, the reports of mounting difficulties from county election officials, particularly in Southwest Georgia, grew to a point where county election officials could not overcome the challenges brought on by COVID-19 in time for in-person voting to begin on April 27.

Additionally, current modeling by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation projects the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia will peak around April 24, only days before in-person voting was scheduled to begin.

While challenges will certainly remain on June 9, these additional three weeks will give the Secretary of State’s Office and counties time to shore up contingency plans, find and train additional poll

workers, and procure supplies and equipment necessary to clean equipment and protect poll workers.

Emergency authority is something that should be exercised carefully, and moving an election should only take place in the rarest of circumstances.

While Raffensperger previously expressed concern that he did not have the authority to move the primary election again, the governor’s extension of the state of emergency to a time that includes almost every day of in-person voting for a May 19 election is sufficient to allow the secretary to exercise the emergency authority given to him by O.C.G.A. § 21-2-50.1 and move the primary election to June 9.

“I certainly realize that every difficulty will not be completely solved by the time in-person voting begins for the June 9 election, but elections must happen, even in less than ideal circumstances,” Raffensperger said.

“Just like our brave health care workers and first responders, our county election officials and poll workers are undertaking work critical to our democracy, and they will continue to do this critical work with all the challenges that the current crisis has brought forth,” Raffensperger continued.

“This postponement

allows us to provide additional protection and safety resources to county election officials, poll workers and voters without affecting the November election.”

The voter registration deadline for the June 9 election will be May 11. Early voting will begin on May 18. Pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 21-2-501, moving the primary election to June 9 will move the primary runoff to Aug. 11.

Pushing back the primary to June 9 gives Georgia election officials additional time to put in place contingency plans to allow for safe and secure voting, but pushing back the primary election any further could potentially have negative consequences on preparation for the Nov. 3 General Election.

Given existing deadlines to prepare and send ballots for the November election, particularly for military voters, moving forward on June 9 is the best way to ensure a successful election year in Georgia.

Absentee ballot applications for the upcoming primary election will continue to be accepted and processed by counties even if the application said May 19.

Once county election officials properly verify the signature on the application, the voter will be sent an absentee ballot for the primary election, now to be held on June 9.