

# Union Countians remain concerned as pandemic persists

By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

With the COVID-19 pandemic not going anywhere anytime soon, many people in the area remain concerned about safety and whether or not others are taking the situation seriously enough.

“If I’m going to be perfectly forward here, I am still worried,” said Annette Crawford at Home Depot Saturday. “I think it is necessary for places to open back up, but I am seeing less people using their masks every week.”

“I don’t know if people are forgetting or not caring or whatever it may be, it just makes me worried and concerned for my safety and the safety of other older folks. I do think that it is time to have things going back to some sort of normal, but things can’t just get back to normal overnight.”

“We need to be sanitary. We need to wear masks for the safety of others. I want to take the mask off as much as the next person, but we need to stay safe. We haven’t seen a huge spike in this area, and I think it needs to stay that way.”

With spring in full bloom and summer rapidly approach-



A family gathers for some outdoor quality time on the banks of Butternut Creek at Meeks Park Saturday.  
Photo by Jarrett Whitener

ing, people are already getting out more and enjoying outdoor and other activities, including interstate travel for shopping and leisure.

“I think as the weather gets more beautiful, people are going to do everything to get out of the house,” Bob Turner said Friday on the Blairsville Square. “I have been doing a little window shopping myself lately and walking around different towns that I can find.”

“I live over in Franklin

(North Carolina), so I am a little ways from home today. You know, up there, we had lockdowns, and we had a sort of curfew for a little bit, and that was hard for a lot of people. My son had to switch to unemployment, as did a lot of other people.”

“I watched him worry about money but also the safety of his family. Now, he is getting to go back to work, and those bills are getting paid. There are just too many ups and downs to this situation, and nobody

knows much about anything going on.”

Of course, people everywhere are concerned about the economic impacts of COVID-19.

“This whole situation is kind of backwards, if you ask me,” Lewis Bailey said Friday at Meeks Park while in town from Texas visiting family. “I don’t think anybody knows what is going on or how to help it best.”

“Everyone is saying that we need to stay inside and stay

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As a result, in lieu of refunds, MUSA has decided to offer full credits for a future season to every player who registered and did not get to play this spring.

If the league can go forward with play in the fall, the credit will cover the registration fee then. If the coronavirus forces another shutdown this fall, it will carry over to the spring of 2021.

The Ortizes claim that offering refunds is something they wanted to do, but they said it would not be sustainable if everyone were to begin demanding their money back.

“We operate season to season on a six-month budget, so every dollar that comes in, plus the extra sponsorship money, it goes to insurance and getting us started,” Alex Ortiz said. “Once the season gets going, any money that’s left goes for referees, trophies and field maintenance.”

“I knew as soon as this all began there would be a backlash. I saw it coming from a mile away. If we had the money or had the county’s backing like the Recreation Department, we would give a refund.”

As alluded to by Mr. Ortiz, the Union County Recreation Department did give full refunds to spring sports registrants.

Another criticism leveled by some parents is that the league used registration fees to pay for uniforms the kids never received, meaning children who signed up for the season walked away with literally nothing to show for it – no playtime, no fee refunds and no jerseys.

Mrs. Ortiz said the jerseys are in her possession, but the league is not handing them out to prevent them from having to purchase new ones in the fall. When the next season gets underway in August, MUSA will distribute them to fall credit users. Families choosing not to participate in the fall may also receive their jerseys at that time if they wish.

There is a question of corporate sponsorship money being allotted to pay for jerseys, which would potentially free up registration fees for refunds, but Mrs. Ortiz said sponsors don’t cover 100 percent of jersey costs.

“The money (our Premium Jersey Sponsor Union General Orthopedics and Sports Medicine) gives us we use to run the league,” she said. “It helps with jersey costs and helps fill in the gaps wherever we need it.”

One of those cost gaps includes field maintenance on the Elan Soccer Fields, she said, which MUSA has been using for years to host league play. The fields are located on roughly 12 acres of land adjacent the old Cott Water Bottling Plant off US 129 North.

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris announced in December the county would be purchasing the privately held acreage from Gooch Trucking Co. Inc. for \$150,000 in order to enable a long-term lease agreement between the county and MUSA.

The county organizes several youth sports programs, but it does not offer soccer, so Paris wanted to create a relationship with MUSA to allow the county to assist local youths interested in playing soccer without getting the county into the business of

running a soccer program itself.

MUSA and the county are currently in discussions on terms to lease the fields to the soccer association, contingent on MUSA remaining a nonprofit organization. The length of the lease would be for 10 years at \$1 a year.

Once a leasing agreement is reached, MUSA will be able to apply for loans and grants to improve their program by having long-term control over the soccer fields.

Over the years, the league has asked for volunteers to assist in cutting field maintenance costs, but help has been in short supply, according to Alex Ortiz.

“Volunteers come as they come,” Mr. Ortiz said. “If we have the volunteers to help, that’s great, but we don’t.”

Julie Ortiz added, “We have a company that does our field maintenance, but we ask for volunteers for our initial field maintenance day. In our three years running the league, we’ve had four volunteers show up.”

According to the county, the Rec Department took over field maintenance from MUSA starting May 18, to last at least through December 2020, after which the local soccer association will be expected to resume caring for the field.

Some parents aren’t buying the league’s explanation as to why it won’t issue refunds and have already said they do not plan on registering their kids with MUSA moving forward.

Blairsville’s Chris Springer said he was disappointed from the get-go with the organization’s handling of the postponement and ensuing no-refund determination. Springer had registered his daughter to play this spring.

“We tried emailing them about a refund, but they wouldn’t respond to us,” he said. “We didn’t find out anything until they released a statement saying they weren’t giving refunds because they had already paid for referees and things like that.”

The Georgia Soccer Association announced March 12 it was suspending all youth soccer activities through April 30. MUSA shared this news the same day via Facebook.

Two weeks later, on March 27, MUSA acknowledged on Facebook that it was “receiving many inquiries about our financial policies regarding refunds, credits, etc.,” noting that it was still waiting to learn how long the “time-out” on the season would be.

On April 16, Georgia Soccer said its initial statewide suspension would be extended through May 15, after which MUSA announced to parents that the local organization would not resume play until potentially the fall.

“Some have asked about cash refunds,” MUSA said in the announcement. “Unfortunately, we as a club are not in a position to offer cash refunds, as this would affect our ability to carry on offering soccer in future seasons.”

At press time, it appeared that partial refunds were not on the table, as the soccer association said that its plan was to give parents and kids “the full value of what they paid for,” presumably using credits toward an upcoming season.

According to Springer, his daughter had only one

practice before the spring season was effectively canceled in March, and he described that lone practice as an unpleasant experience for all.

“We had to bring our own soccer balls, the nets were destroyed, and we didn’t get to use the field because they double-booked everyone,” he said. “The coach, who was just another dad, didn’t even know he was coaching until one week prior.”

“We had to practice on the sidelines, and when we did get on the field, we only had a few minutes before we had to get off.”

Springer said his opinion hasn’t changed since first learning that MUSA would not be refunding parents, and he’s just as upset now as he was then.

“I think they’re con artists,” he said regarding the MUSA administration. “Where did the money go?”

Alex Ortiz said he has not ignored parents; however, he said he has no time for personal attacks aimed at himself, his wife, the league or its volunteers.

“I’m very protective of this league and everyone involved,” he said. “When you call me a crook or a liar, no, I’m not going to respond to you.”

According to Ortiz, most parents have been reasonable, so he chalks the negativity surrounding the league up to a “few bad apples” on social media.

One of the parents who supports MUSA’s decision is Jess Stephens of Murphy, North Carolina. According to Stephens, MUSA has done a great job remaining transparent and keeping parents in the loop, and she doesn’t understand why the organization has come under so much scrutiny.

“Information was sent out through the entire process,” she said. “First, they sent a message that they were waiting to see what would happen. Then, we got a message that they called off the season and there were no refunds.”

“I don’t think this is anyone’s fault, and we are okay with getting credit. I think some people just don’t understand the expenses that (MUSA has). People are looking at this from a personal standpoint and not a business standpoint. There’s a lot more involved than just mowing grass.”

“My daughter has played with MUSA for five years, and we’ve watched it grow since (Alex and Julie Ortiz) took over. Everything about the league has gotten better, and I believe they’re catching too much heat.”

Across the nation, communities large and small are dealing with cancellations of youth soccer leagues with no refunds. The outcry has grown to the point of prompting a response from United Soccer Coaches’ Chairperson Haley Carter.

In an interview with Soccer America, Carter was asked how local youth clubs should react to parents asking for refunds. Carter offered insight into how to deal with cancellations during the current economic crisis for both league officials and parents.

“Each club, organization, environment and market is different, so I cannot make a single recommendation that applies in each context,” Carter told Soccer America. “However, I encourage clubs to abide by their current, published refund

safe, but they haven’t really given us a healthy way to do that. I just don’t understand how people think we can run a government and local economies without people working.

“I get that it is scary, but

I also think it is time to face our fears. I work construction, and I am happy to get back to work. It’s time for us to take initiative. It’s time for us to do something before we destroy our economy.”