

# TOWN OF CHATHAM, MA

## COVID-19 COMMUNITY FORUM

*SUMMARY FROM MAY 11, 2020*



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A REGAN  
COMMUNICATIONS  
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*During Monday night's community forum, participants expressed a variety of concerns related to COVID-19, such as large gatherings as the town opens up ("our population will quadruple...a summer day in Chatham is a large public gathering") and are worried about putting a strain on police, fire and healthcare resources. While some strongly favored canceling mass gatherings altogether, several residents and business leaders offered some creative solutions to safely continue the weekly band concerts, Mondays on Main, July Fourth parade and keeping the beaches open this summer. Many were in agreement over the difficulty and hard choices of balancing lives and livelihoods – and that as the town opens up for business and community events, clear, concise information via signage, online platforms, print media etc. ought to be a central focus. Below is a summary of comments from full-time and seasonal residents, business owners and nonprofit leaders.*

## FIVE QUESTIONS:

### 1. How do we handle large public gatherings?

There were many voices who made the case that, while unfortunate, Chatham – like other towns on the Cape have already decided – all large public events/gatherings should be prohibited throughout the summer season, especially considering the fact that 55 percent of town residents are over 55-years-old and therefore more vulnerable to being infected by COVID-19. Still, there were also many voices who supported opening town businesses while offering ideas on how to create an environment that protects public health and safety.

#### **Band Concerts**

While many residents balked at the idea of holding band concerts, several residents were in favor of holding concerts at Veterans Field.

Below is a synopsis of ideas/thoughts expressed on this topic:

- Create safe zones at Veterans Field for people to view concerts and discourage the tradition of people marching around during the songs. At the ballfield, the band could safely distance themselves on the bleachers and concertgoers could spread out their blankets.
- Put a cap on the number of people allowed to attend.
- Public could spread out on the hills.
- Host virtual band concerts, such as the Memorial Day Commemoration.
- Band concerts are not safe and should be canceled.

- It's a no-brainer to cancel all mass gatherings.

### ***Mondays on Main***

As it relates to Mondays on Main, a bulk of the discussion revolved around pedestrian and vehicle traffic in and around Main Street. Many emails were in favor of closing Main Street to cars (not just for Mondays on Main, but other days as well).

Below is a synopsis of ideas/thoughts expressed on this topic:

- Institute one-way walking pattern on Main Street to control people passing one another.
- Create pedestrian zone
- However, several participants from the business community said closing Main Street to vehicles simply won't work for businesses who rely on deliveries (e.g. UPS/FedEx).

### ***Beaches***

Many expressed concerns about the challenges of enforcing physical distancing at the beaches. However, the majority of those who participated in the forum suggested ideas for how to both keep the beaches open and provide for enforcement of physical distancing.

Below is a synopsis of ideas/thoughts expressed on this topic:

- Only allow residents of Chatham to purchase beach passes this summer (including summer residents).
- All beachgoers should wear masks and only allow 50 percent of capacity in parking lots.
- Post a police officer at entrance of every beach to enforce mask rule.
- Rope off sections for groups to sit at the beach. Create corridor where people could enter and exit.
- Some residents argued that the Town can't keep the beaches closed. The Town must find additional means for resources and funding to police the beaches, because as one resident pointed out, lifeguards can't be expected to keep an eye on the water while policing COVID-19 protocol on the beaches.
- Don't issue one-day passes.

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- Open the beaches on a session basis. Hold morning, afternoon and evening sessions, where a certain amount of people would be allowed to enter/exit during each time frame. Another resident suggested allowing beach access on alternate days.
- Closely follow what other towns are doing because it will affect Chatham. If one nearby town closes their beaches, more people will visit Chatham beaches.
- Beaches should be open and monitored because people need the ability to get out.

#### *July Fourth Parade*

As with other town events/gatherings, there were many voices who argued that, while unfortunate, Chatham, like other towns on the Cape have already decided, all large public events/gatherings should be prohibited throughout the summer season. However, there were residents who suggested creative ways the town could still have a parade.

Below is a synopsis of ideas/thoughts expressed on this topic:

- Instead of holding the parade route down Main Street, change it to a longer route through neighborhoods to space out the parade. Publicize it early, celebrate the unity of the parade and encourage social distancing.
- Many people cited statistics to support their opinions of canceling the parade (i.e., “Massachusetts is ranked third in the nation for COVID-19 cases”) and said we can’t have any large gatherings, like a Fourth of July parade.
- We shouldn’t have parades. They are not safe, says one year-round resident who referred to data from infectious disease experts.
- Promote a bigger and better parade in 2021.

#### *General Comments*

- Large events can be manageable with masks, although some residents said even if town businesses open and community events are held, they will not attend because of a lack of widespread testing, no tracing system in place, no vaccine.
- Start off slow to open up Chatham, restricting motel rooms to 25% capacity.
- Close the beaches and don’t allow events for more than 10 people. We should not be encouraging people to come to Chatham.
- The focus should be on how our towns should prepare for the fall.
- We need to prepare for backup plan in case our First Responders are affected by an outbreak.

## 2. How can we establish a consistent set of town-wide guidelines for safety?

One of the stickiest issues this question raised was how to regulate or allow for short-term rentals. While there was support for not allowing any short-term rentals this summer, it was also noted that banning short-term rentals would be financially devastating to the owners.

In addition to the discussion about short-term rentals, one message about face-coverings stood out for its simple but powerful expression of the seriousness with which the behavior of others affects those in town primarily concerned about their health: “your mask equals my life.”

Below is a synopsis of ideas/thoughts expressed on this topic:

- Follow state guidelines and not allow large gatherings
- Mark social distancing footprints
- Launch robust testing and tracing capabilities
- Downtown businesses and elsewhere in Chatham need to respond to government guidelines to open their doors. People can't survive an entire year being closed down.
- One-way sidewalks to maintain social distancing but close down Main Street to pedestrians is not the solution because it's impractical for deliveries and for employees to get to work.
- Allow retailers to set up outdoor shops at Veterans Field, although at least one business owner noted that for some businesses and outdoor shop/tent won't be adequate to keep the business afloat.
- If Chatham is more relaxed than other towns, we will get more people. Chatham should have a reputation for mask enforcement.
- Try to reduce complexity and the number of people in town.
- Maintain no short-term rentals.
- Create a formal letter regarding town guidelines to distribute to hotels, real estate agencies and businesses. If people don't follow guidelines, there should be a fine.
- Chatham should adopt all regional and federal guidelines and add Chatham-specific guidelines.

- Stores have signs saying shoes required. Storefronts should have signs that say masks required.
- There should be a fine for throwing out used gloves and masks on the ground.

### **3. How do businesses and non-profits operate effectively and safely?**

The feedback on this question ranged from ideas of what ought to be required (or not) at restaurants and retail businesses to the town's policies on short-term rentals.

Below is a synopsis of ideas/thoughts expressed on this topic:

- Encourage restaurants to have outside dining and space tables far apart.
- Allow food trucks.
- Focus on picnic options and takeout options.
- Disinfect tables after each dining party.
- Greatly reduce capacity in restaurants.
- Some expressed worry about being overly restricted. There needs to be a fine balance.
- Place signage at beginning of rotary, letting people know what is expected of them. For instance, the Chatham Merchants have A-frame signs for Mondays on Main messaging that could be used to inform residents and visitors of town protocol.
- Provide merchants with laminated signage for their businesses so it's a consistent message throughout town.
- Organize town group with key players to figure out guidelines.
- ID checks at the door, limit shoppers.
- Cashless payments (only credit card).
- Don't allow customers to try on clothes in stores.
- Cleaning requirements for all businesses to be monitored and reviewed on a weekly basis.
- Restaurants can work takeout for in-dining reservations.
- Put up signage in all public areas explaining guidelines.



- Establish satellite tents in Kate Gould Park.
- Rope off all of Main Street parking, to provide more space for customers to wait in line.
- Essential stores in town have senior hours for customers over 65 and people who are immuno-compromised.

#### **4. How do we ensure there is a clear understanding and enforcement of the established guidelines?**

Two major themes arose from forum discussion on enforcement of established guidelines: consistency between town, state and regional guidelines; the need for clear, concise messaging throughout town via signage, online platforms, print media and fliers.

Below is a synopsis of ideas/thoughts expressed on this topic:

- Enable police/town health agents to enforce mask and social distancing.
- Use electronic messaging boards.
- Create a map of Main Street, one-way starting at rotary for cars and open up the other direction for walking, with clear directions for crosswalks.
- A weekly update on the front page of the Chronicle.
- Towns and municipalities should use direction from the state as their guide.
- Rules should be clear, concise and mandatory. These rules cannot be optional.
- Create marketing program “Welcome to Chatham Summer 2020”.
- Email or text alerts, use signage to alert visitors.
- Promote Chatham as a safe and healthy place to visit.
- Store needs to have a sign in the window: no mask, no entry.
- Distribute fliers to rentals, hotels, businesses.
- Publish guidelines across many platforms as possible.
- One caller pointed out that Chatham is a Top 5 destination. The town needs to leverage its network and call in the best and brightest. Chatham is a few weeks behind planning.

## 5. What else do we need to consider?

The point was made that whatever regulations are adopted, they need to be reviewed and/or updated frequently, as “facts on the ground” evolve.

It was also suggested the Town consider developing a COVID-19 app, similar to the Sharktivity app used by the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy. The app would provide information and updates of COVID-19 cases as they happen.

Protect vulnerable senior citizens and provide grocery delivery help for seniors who are having a difficult time stocking up on groceries.

Open up Chatham to save jobs and mental health.

## Conclusions

Many forum participants thanked the Board of Selectmen for holding the forum and seeking feedback on these vital issues before making any decisions – in contrast to other towns on the Cape who did not seek community input first. The Cape Cod Times story published on the forum noted Chatham’s leadership, as it was reported, “the town-wide video forum was a first for the Cape.”

The story further characterized the forum as being moderated in a way that “combined the grace of a symphony conductor with the expediency of an air traffic controller in weaving together video, telephone, and 147 email comments over a three-hour forum.” This is a testament, backed up by follow-up emails to the Town, to the wisdom of town officials in hosting a forum of this kind, as well as the effectiveness of the preparation and planning for the forum.

More importantly, the success of the forum gives the Board of Selectmen a reservoir of good-will in the community as Selectmen make decisions that as one participant aptly noted, is “an incredibly complex problem, especially with Chatham so heavily dependent on 10 weeks of summer.”

While the forum did not constitute a scientific poll on whether the town should cancel, postpone or host large public events, the majority of participants who offered comments said the town should not hold any large public gatherings this summer even as they supported allowing town businesses to open in accordance with state and regional guidelines designed to protect public safety and health.

Although town beaches are attractions that for all intents and purposes constitutes large public gatherings, there seemed to be a consensus among those who spoke during the forum, that the beaches ought to remain open – with elevated enforcement of physical distancing, the wearing of masks, increased signage, and other measures to reduce the numbers of beach-goers at any one time.



There was also wide-spread agreement expressed during the forum that when the state lifts the stay-at-home advisory, the town should change pedestrian and vehicle traffic patterns along Main Street, although the idea of closing off Main Street to vehicular traffic was noted by at least one Main Street business owner as being unworkable due to the problems it would create for deliveries and employees.

As for retail shops, restaurants, and other businesses in town, residents expressed a variety of measures the town should consider to protect the health and safety of customers and employees with the expectation that whatever regulations are put in place be consistent, reviewed frequently, and changed quickly when the “facts on the ground” indicate.

One challenge highlighted during the forum was what should be done about short-term rentals with some participants arguing that no short-term rentals should be allowed while others noting that shutting down short-term rentals would be financially devastating for owners; to say nothing of the cascading effect it would have on local businesses who rely on short-term rental visitors.

As it relates to town-wide policies and guidelines, there was an expectation expressed by many that whatever decisions town officials make, it ought to be coordinated and consistent with whatever guidelines are issued by the state and the guidelines being developed by the regional task force for the entire Cape.

Lastly, one of the biggest areas of agreement among all participants was a call for the Town to provide timely, reliable information to citizens and visitors from everything ranging from infection rates to signage and messaging about COVID-19-related practices and protocols.