

Supervisors in towns of Niagara, Wheatfield cautiously optimistic as county enters phase one

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On May 17, Gov. Andrew Cuomo made the announcement that, beginning May 18, Western New York could officially enter phase one of the state's reopening plan. The announcement came after local officials said the area had fulfilled the final requirements for reopening. These required metrics dictated that the area needed to secure 521 contact tracers, and have hospitalizations and deaths fall (or at least remain low) over three days.

According to the state's reopening plan, phase one allows for the reopening of certain nonessential businesses deemed low-risk of accelerating the spread of the virus. These include businesses in the fields of construction, agriculture (including forestry, fishing and hunting), retail (limited to curbside or in-store pickup or drop off), and manufacturing and wholesale trade.

The area will now have to maintain steady hospitalization and death rates for two weeks before it can be cleared for phase two reopening plans, which would include businesses related to professional services (including legal), retail, administrative support, and real estate/ rental and leasing.

As Niagara County begins the reopening process, local officials said they're cautiously optimistic about how the gradual reopening will go, but acknowledge there's still plenty for local governments to be concerned about.

"None of us have ever been through anything like this, so we're really kind of trying to do the right thing and hope we don't want to advance too fast or wait too long," Town of Niagara Supervisor Lee Wallace said.

He explained that, while town officials are obviously concerned about the economic toll the shutdown continues to take on town workers and businesses, the reopening is something of a double-edged sword.

"I am happy that we're starting the process to reopen, but I get concerned that people might jump the gun, which could cause a setback," Wallace said.

He added, "Now that we use the term 'reopening,' I want people to understand: Everything we've learned up to this point — the social distancing, the masks, everything — that stuff doesn't just go out the window. We have to maintain that."

Wallace's views were also shared by Town of Wheatfield

Supervisor Don MacSwan.

"Everybody is anxious. Everybody is tense. Everybody wants to get back to work, and I would love to see everyone back at work. But we have to be cautious," MacSwan said. "We still have over 800 cases in Niagara County. I have concerns about the health and safety of not only the residents, but our employees, too. We have essential workers highway, sewer, water department, they've worked through this whole thing."

MacSwan also discussed some of the new challenges that both officials and law enforcement will undergo as the reopening process continues.

"I mean, when you really think about it, how are they gonna regulate restaurants, how are you going to keep that distancing and separation? It's gonna be difficult," MacSwan said.

But it's not just local businesses that will have to adjust to these challenges. The two supervisors also discussed how the reopening process has had an effect on the functions of local municipalities.

MacSwan said that, despite issuing many necessary permits throughout the shutdown, on Tuesday, the phone for the Town of Wheatfield building inspector was ringing off the wall for people to get permits. This leads to another big concern, which is trying to protect workers, particularly in the water, sewer and parks departments, as the demand for services begins to increase. Wallace said workers have been diligent in sanitizing department work trucks and limiting crews to one person per vehicle.

Another struggle both officials are facing is trying to reopen their respective town halls, something each said won't likely occur until at least mid-June. In the meantime, both locations have been outfitted with similar precautionary features such as Plexiglas screens and sanitizing stations. The Town of Wheatfield will also have constables ensure anyone who enters is wearing a mask, and is screened to see if they've been sick, or been around anyone who's been sick.

MacSwan outlined some other changes residents will face when entering the hall: "In order to keep up the six-foot separation, along with masks and everything else, we're going to have to place people in their seats, and people are going to have to pre-register before they come to the meetings. It's not going to be an easy

task, but we're going to give it a shot."

While the prospect of reopening would seem to offer some respite from the onslaught of disheartening news, the direness of the situation in Niagara County seems apt to dampen spirits. In a press release posted on the Town of Niagara's Facebook page, the town announced this week it is cancelling a number of popular summer festivities, including their summer concert series. Wheatfield also announced this week via the supervisor's newsletter it is canceling a number of functions, as well, including the 4th of July celebration. Wallace said the decision was made with a "heavy heart," but insisted it was the only way to ensure safety.

In the Town of Wheatfield, "We have eliminated any activity where social distancing wouldn't be possible because we had to. So, our youth center is still closed, the senior center is still closed, and they're gonna remain closed, again because they attract large groups," MacSwan said.

Despite the unknowns, both supervisors shared hope that the reopening plans continue, and discussed many of the positive outcomes they hope to see. Wallace noted the Town of Niagara had taken a 20% hit on sales taxes since the outbreak began, but was optimistic the municipality could recoup some of those losses as the reopening continues. He also said he believes the area could see a slight resurgence for in-person retail.

"I don't know if it'll be a long-lasting effect, but I think you're going to see people running back to the brick-and-mortar stores. ... I think people have been stuck in the house for so long that they're probably going to want to go out and shop," Wallace said.

While there are many unknowns yet to be realized as the reopening unfurls, Wallace said the responsible ways in which residents and local businesses have handled themselves amidst the outbreak are reasons to be optimistic.

"I think the businesses are doing an outstanding job trying to do the right thing, following the lead of the scientists and those people who have more experience than we certainly do. Most people around here have been taking this pretty seriously," Wallace said, before sternly adding "90,000 deaths (in the U.S.) — they better take it seriously."

WNY residents encouraged to be counted in census

Higgins: Local response rates are down, accurate count critical to WNY receiving its fair share

Congressman Brian Higgins, City of Niagara Falls Mayor Robert Restaino and Niagara Ministerial Council President the Rev. Craig Pridgen, senior pastor of True Bethel Baptist Church, are teaming up to share information about the census and stress how important it is for residents to be counted.

Every 10 years, the federal government conducts a census to count the number of people living in the U.S. The Census Bureau's 2020 outreach began in March with residents receiving questionnaires by mail. The questionnaire consists of nine questions requesting basic information and can be completed online, over the phone or by mail. Responses are kept private and the data is used to determine equal representation and fair distribution of federal resources.

Higgins said, "Achieving an accurate census count is critical for our families and communities. It plays a role in determining health care, transportation, education, affordable housing and much more. Full participation today will determine the resources provided to our community for the next decade."

Niagara County

According to the census "Hard to Count" map, as of May 17, just 65.4% of residents in Niagara County and 51.8% in the City of Niagara Falls have self-responded to the census, falling below recent response rates. In 2010, 69.3% of households in Niagara County filled out the census questionnaire, a decrease from 2000 when 75% self-responded.

Higgins' camp said census numbers are vitally important to ensuring communities, schools and families receive the federal resources they need. In 2014, the City of Niagara Falls nearly lost its \$2 million-plus annual Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding after its reported population numbers fell below the 50,000 population threshold for CDBG recipients. Higgins was able to protect the City of Niagara Falls from losing that funding for parks, infrastructure and neighborhood improvements, by winning approval of an amendment to the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development bill.

Erie County

Erie County's self-response rate to the census is currently at 64.8%, below the 2010 response of 69.6% and the 2000 rate of 74% self-reporting. The cities of Buffalo and Lackawanna both have lower response rates and are at risk of being undercounted. Just 58.2% of Lackawanna residents and 47.3% of Buffalo residents have



responded to the census thus far. Response rates in certain census tracts in Buffalo and Niagara falls are under 25%.

A report issued by the George Washington University Institute of Public Policy notes New York communities received over \$73.3 billion in federal funding through 55 federal programs that derive funding levels based on 2010 census numbers. The programs range from Federal Direct Student Loans to Highway Funding and Special Education Grants to Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) funding.

Census Resources

The current nationwide response rate is 59.5%. Due to COVID-19, the deadline to respond to the census has been extended until Oct. 31. Higgins' camp said, "Responding quickly by mail, online or on the phone means census takers won't have to come to your door to collect constitutionally required census data."

Additional resources:

- ✓ What questions are asked on the census: <https://2020census.gov/en/about-questions.html>
- ✓ Census information in multiple languages: www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/planning-management/language-resources.html
- ✓ Respond to the census online at: www.my2020census.gov
- ✓ Respond to the census over the phone in English via: 844-330-2020 or go to www.2020census.gov/en/ways-to-respond/responding-by-phone for additional phone numbers to respond in languages other than English
- ✓ Respond to the census by mail by sending your questionnaire to: U.S. Census Bureau, PO Box 20201, Jeffersonville, NY 47190-9701.



COVID-19 UPDATE

- Re-opening for in office visits Tuesday, June 2nd.
- Strict safety and disinfecting procedures are in place per CDC guidelines.
- Telehealth treatment options available for new and current patients.

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