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Coronavirus upends life in Lamorinda

By Nick Marnell



Lafayette United Methodist Church board members practice safe distancing.

MOFD Station 42 engineer Janet Brandi-Routt dressed in protective equipment.



Lafayette United Methodist Church board members practice safe distancing. MOFD Station 42 engineer Janet Brandi-Routt dressed in protective equipment

been detected," cautioned Ori Tzvieli, acting Contra Costa County Health Officer. He said that testing so far has been limited to the sickest patients, those who have traveled and those in nursing homes. Should county hospitals need to increase capacity, Tzvieli said they would cancel elective surgeries, erect tents on site and rely on regional partners.

Contra Costa County reported 29 cases of COVID-19 by March 15, nearly five times the number of the previous week. The Board of Supervisors proclaimed a local emergency, and the county health department prohibited mass gatherings of 100 or more through March 31. Gov. Gavin Newsom on March 15 called for "deep social distancing," asking all California bars to close and calling for home isolation of everyone over 65, though he stopped short of mandating either action.

As a result, a massive lifestyle disruption swept through Lamorinda.

The city of Lafayette canceled its entire March public meeting calendar March 12 as well as all events scheduled at city facilities, and later closed city offices to the public. "We don't have enough information on the virus and how to mitigate it. Because of that, we decided to take this action to prevent the spread of the virus," Mayor Mike Anderson said. The city of Orinda canceled all of its public meetings for March and shut down all city facilities. The town of Moraga has closed its offices but will conduct business via email and telephone. The March 25 council meeting remains in place but will be live streamed to the public.

Lynn Mackey, Contra Costa County superintendent of schools, called school an "essential convening" at a March 10 press conference and did not recommend mass closures. "Evidence that closing schools will prevent an epidemic is just not there," Tzvieli said. But after emergency board meetings late on March 13, all four Lamorinda public school districts announced a three-week cancellation of classes through April 3. Saint Mary's College has suspended in-person classes until April 14, shifting to online instruction.

Alicia Trost of BART reported that ridership of 232,000 on March 12 had dropped 45% from an average Thursday in February, but she could not provide specific data for the Orinda and Lafayette stations. "Unfortunately it is an automated process and staff is not able to manipulate it at this time," Trost said.

Lamorinda first responders changed many of their operating procedures. The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District adjusts its emergency dispatch protocol when COVID-19 symptoms are called in, and the district crews send in one person donned in protective equipment to do an assessment of a patient. "Only then do we involve the rest of the crew," district spokesman Steve Hill said. The Moraga-Orinda Fire District follows the same dispatch protocols and the recommendations of the county health department. Battalion Chief Jerry Lee said that all crew members are outfitted in hospital-type gowns, respirators, eye protection and gloves to respond to patients with respiratory illness symptoms. MOFD reported no transports of patients who had tested positive for COVID-19.

The Diocese of Oakland, which includes three Lamorinda parishes, updated its guidance to excuse all Catholics from mandatory attendance at Sunday Mass, until further notice. Other Lamorinda churches suspended live services or dispensed with many of their social norms, requesting that parishioners stay at least an arm's-length apart.

The afternoon of March 11, our lives abruptly changed.

That day, the director-general of the World Health Organization said that COVID-19, a disease caused by a new coronavirus, "can be characterized as a pandemic. We have never before seen a pandemic sparked by a coronavirus. We have rung the alarm bell loud and clear."

Almost instantly, financial markets collapsed, sweeping travel bans were put in place, major sporting events were canceled, and sports figures, celebrities and politicians announced that they had been infected. Public events were canceled one after the other, at a pace so breathtaking that it was sometimes difficult to keep up.

COVID-19, a flu-like illness, originated in a Chinese province in December and as of mid-March, 165,000 people worldwide had been infected and more than 6,400 had died, according to the WHO. "We have had limited testing, and there are more out there than have

At the end of an extraordinary, pandemic-driven week - capped by the president's declaration of a national emergency - uncertainty was the rule as day-to-day life took a surreal turn. Should we stay home? How often should we wash our hands? Which friends can we safely touch? Will we ever see fully stocked store shelves again?

Still, public health officials have set the odds of serious illness or death due to COVID-19 very low. Most people infected by the virus develop mild or moderate symptoms, such as a fever or cough, and recover in about two weeks. "Wash your hands a lot and stay home if you're sick," Tzvieli said.

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