



NEWS • 3
GOOD BUSINESS:
 Entrepreneurial Spirit Alive
 and Well at E & S Graphics

NEWS • 16

HEAT SEEKING:
 Ithaca Fire Department
 Receives Equipment Donation



"GRATIOT COUNTY'S LARGEST CIRCULATION NEWSPAPER"

Gratiot County Herald



THURSDAY, APRIL 15, 2021

GCHERALD.COM

NUMBER 15 • \$1.50



HERALD ALL-COUNTY
 Page 11

(989) 875-4151

123 North Main Street,
 Ithaca, MI 48847

HOURS

Monday-Friday
 9 AM - 4:30 PM



View us online...

www.gcherald.com



PLAY BALL! Ithaca's Ethan Hull got the save and also drove in a pair of runs in the Yellowjackets' varsity baseball season opener on Monday, a 10-5 win over St. Charles. Gratiot County schools' spring sports teams are competing for the first time since June, 2019. (Full coverage page 10)

To Zoom or Not to Zoom? For Local Governments, That Is The Question

By Emma Selmon
 Herald Staff Writer

Just like everything else in the age of COVID, civic engagement has looked different over the past year. As many local government bodies shifted to partially or fully remote meetings, board members and residents alike have been able to participate from any place that has phone service or an Internet connection.

But over a year into the pandemic, several Gratiot municipalities are opting to pull the plug on electronic meetings in favor of something resembling a pre-COVID normal, while others still are choosing "hybrid" meetings that combine physical and remote attendance. Across Gratiot County, the way residents can get involved in their local municipalities varies depending on where they live.

The Gratiot County Board of Commissioners is one of those bodies sticking with a hybrid option for the time being, although some board members "are anxious to return to in-person meetings," said County Administrator Tracey Cordes.

The issue was brought up briefly at last week's Board of Commissioners meeting. Cordes shared that in her communication with the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, Health Officer Marcus Cheatham "expressed hope" that the board would continue to meet virtually, especially given the recent surge in COVID-19 cases.

See ZOOM on page 5

Despite Gov's Plea, County Schools Will Continue With In-Person Instruction, Athletics

By William Meiners
 Herald Staff Writer

Governor Gretchen Whitmer's suggestion that Michigan high schools go virtual and postpone youth sporting events for two weeks because of rising COVID-19 cases was heard but not followed in Gratiot County.

In a press conference on Friday, April 9, Whitmer said, "we all have to step up our game for the next two weeks."

Well before the end of the school day last Friday, most local superintendents had informed students and families of their decisions to stay the course.

With spiking coronavirus case numbers, Whitmer stressed the move to remote learning and a suspension of sports, as well as an avoidance of restaurant indoor dining, was a voluntary call to action. "To be very clear," she said, "these are not an order, mandates, or requirements."

According to numbers provided by Michigan.gov, over Sunday and Monday, the average number of new confirmed COVID-19 cases was 4,837 per day. As of April 12, Gratiot County has a total of 2,728 confirmed cases.

In spite of the growing number of Michigan-



Gov. Whitmer stressed the move to remote learning and a suspension of sports was a voluntary call to action.

ders receiving vaccinations, hospitalization rates and the fears of a coronavirus variant affecting younger folks have many officials concerned. Still, upon consultation the area schools are resolved to maintain precautions while trying to finish the final several weeks of school in the familiar settings.

To report to staff, students, and families, Gratiot's superintendents had to quickly convene to consider their course of actions. The most detailed explanation may have come from Paul Hungerford, superintendent of Fulton Schools.

"I met with all Gratiot-Isabella RESD membership schools superintendents to discuss our current conditions related to COVID-19, and how to move forward," Hungerford wrote in a letter to his district, subsequently shared to Fulton's social media accounts.

Hungerford said those administrators completed the Mid-Michigan's Health Department's "Decision Making Tool for Schools." He then reported, "All of our schools met the criteria to continue face-to-face instruction based on the presented conditions within the decision-making tool."

The school administrators then shared their findings with Dr. Jennifer Morse, director of the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD). "She also supported our decision to remain in session based on our findings," Hungerford wrote.

See PLEA on page 5

3 WAYS TO SUBSCRIBE!

ONLINE
gcherald.com

CALL
 989-875-4151

STOP IN
 123 N. Main St.
 Ithaca



MASONIC PATHWAYS

800-321-9357

1200 Wright Ave | Alma, MI

Assisted Living... AND SO MUCH MORE

We are now accepting applications for individuals and couples wishing to live independently or requiring some assistance.

We've just completed a major remodel of residential activity areas, including all new:

- Video Streaming Theatre
- Resident/Family Kitchen & Gathering Area
- Media Room (Library & Computer Lab)
- Game/Puzzle room
- Club 81 Sports Lounge



ZOOM continued from page 1

Under current Michigan law and a county-wide declaration, boards and commissions in Gratiot have the option — but are not required — to meet virtually through the end of 2021. For those that choose to incorporate in-person components, however, COVID-19 safety protocols like masking and social distancing are still required.

So for now, local governments have a good deal of flexibility in deciding the best and safest way for their boards to deliberate — but those options haven't always been clear, and they've recently changed.

At the end of last year, the state legislature passed an amendment to the Open Meetings Act that clarified how local governing bodies could hold public meetings amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Signed into law by Governor Whitmer on Dec. 22, 2020, the amendment allowed public bodies to hold meetings remotely — without a quorum of members physically present in the meeting room — for any reason through March 31, 2021 and retroactively back to March 18, 2020.

The amendment was passed in part to settle legal questions that arose last fall, when the governor's authority to extend her emergency orders without approval from the legislature was struck down by the Michigan Supreme Court.

That means for bodies like the Gratiot County Board of Commissioners, who held meetings during this time period without a quorum of members attending in-person, the actions taken at such remote meetings are considered legal and valid.

This particular provision expired two weeks ago, but the amendment still allows for remote meetings to continue through the end of 2021 under certain criteria: absences due to military duty, absences due to medical conditions, or the existence of a state of emergency or disaster declared by the state or a local government body.

Gratiot County is currently under such a declaration. The Board of Commissioners passed a resolution to declare a local state of emergency on March 17, 2020. They moved to rescind the original order on June 2, but chose to reinstate it at their Dec. 1 meeting, largely to ensure their continued ability to meet remotely should COVID exposure or illness necessitate it.

In their 4-1 decision this winter,

the Board of Commissioners voted in favor of reinstating the county-wide state of emergency declaration, extending it through Dec. 31, 2021 and imposing it retroactively back to June 2. Chuck Murphy, who now serves as chairman of the board of commissioners, was the sole opponent of the move.

Because of this county-wide state of emergency, all municipalities throughout Gratiot have the option to continue fully remote meetings through the end of the year.

Among the municipalities continuing to meet electronically is the Alma City Commission. Gratiot's most populous city also features one of the largest local government boards in the county, with seven elected commissioners.

Adding in the city clerk, the city manager and other necessary staff, the Alma meetings often involve 10 or more individuals before counting members of the public who would want to attend. And while the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services amended emergency order currently exempts public meetings from the 25-person limit on indoor gatherings, the city commission is unwilling to take the risk of a crowded meeting.

City Manager Matt Schooley said that it would be "very difficult for the City of Alma to hold a meeting in a space that could safely distance" all the necessary personnel while also allowing the public to attend.

While the City Commission as a whole is sticking with Zoom meetings for the time being, Schooley noted that other city boards and commissions have been able to conduct in-person meetings with safe social distancing, including a planning commission meeting held at the library last Monday. And as the weather improves, there has been some discussion in City Commission meetings about potentially gathering outside for official business.

Another seven-person board in Gratiot is taking a different approach. The Ithaca City Council is planning for the council members and city officials to meet in-person, but to have members of the public "enter virtually" so they don't exceed the safe capacity limit, said Cathy Cameron, city clerk.

The County Board of Commissioner's approach is somewhere between Alma's and Ithaca's. Some commissioners are present

in the meeting room, while others join via Zoom. And, like Alma, the Zoom meetings are streamed live on YouTube, and the videos remain on their channel for future viewing.

Beyond the Gratiot County Board of Commissioners, the Alma City Commission and the Ithaca City Council, many local governments are switching back to a traditional meeting format, where the public can physically join the boards in the meeting rooms.

Some, like St. Louis and Washington Township, are keeping some remote options open for their residents. St. Louis resumed in-person meetings this month, but can set up a conference call upon request, and Washington Township is planning to continue to stream their meetings live on Zoom.

But several townships with smaller boards and smaller populations have returned to in-person meetings in part because they don't tend to see so much resident participation that social distancing would be an issue. In Elba Township, for example, the board averages "about 2 visitors a month," according to Clerk Madalin Morris.

And Emerson Township "rarely" has residents join at all, so their five-person board can easily spread out, said Clerk Jodie Reeves. Unless there is a change in state requirements, they don't plan to return to virtual meetings.

As the state of the pandemic continues to evolve, so do municipalities' approaches to holding open public meetings. But for the time being, Gratiot residents will continue to see at least some local government activity remain online as the county sticks with YouTube and Zoom.

"We are not out of the woods yet vis a vis Covid so we continue to follow the guidance of health officials in order to maintain as safe an environment as possible," Cordes said.

PLEA continued from page 1

Regarding the continuation of spring sports, Hungerford pointed out the weekly "antigen rapid testing" utilized by Chad Podolak, Fulton's athletic director, for all participating athletes in the middle and high schools. "We're happy to report that we didn't have any positive tests," Hungerford wrote regarding the first-round results. "This large sample size demonstrates our safety measures being followed at school are working."

Hungerford concluded his letter by stressing the need to reevaluate the situation on an ongoing basis. "Please know the safety of our students and staff continues to be our top priority," he wrote. "All staff members have been provided the opportunity to receive full vaccinations."

Students who are 16 to 18 years old are being provided with vaccination opportunities, as well. By closely monitoring the conditions at Fulton Schools, Hungerford wrote they "will make the appropriate decisions for the remainder of the school year."

Decisions to open or close school doors are never easy to make. That's especially true whenever multiple factors come into play. With high school winter sports like basketball and wrestling hitting regional tournament time and the spring sports of baseball, softball, track and field, tennis, and golf just getting underway, safe, uninterrupted play is certainly preferred. By adhering to the testing requirements per the state and the Michigan High School Athletic Association, Ithaca Schools will also continue to keep the fields of play open.

In responding to questions from The Herald, Steven Netzley, superintendent of Ithaca Public Schools, echoed much of Hungerford's philosophy on the subject. "All of the schools in Gratiot County work closely with the Mid Michigan District Health Department to determine the best course of action for each of our schools," he said. "At the present time we continue to see low rates of COVID positive cases in the school population. Based on this information we decided to continue in-person learning and spring sports as planned."

As for the ongoing safety measures, Netzley said, "We continue to enforce the wearing of masks, social distancing where possible, hand washing, and enhanced cleaning protocols in all school facilities."

Through coordinated efforts with Dr. Morse and the MMDHD, "the best course of action" will emerge over the next few weeks. "We will continue to closely monitor the number of COVID positive cases and the number of direct close contacts that have to be quarantined within our school population," Netzley said.

IT'S GRILLING SEASON
 Make sure your propane tank is full
20 lb. cylinder fill
\$11.00
 50% off ALL in-stock grill parts
Gas Production Co., Inc.
 8512 E. M-46, Vestaburg
 989-268-5079 OR 800-991-7477
 www.gasproductioncompany.com
 OPEN: MON.-FRI. 8am - 5pm

It's Garden Time at
GODLEY'S COUNTRY FLORAL
 seed potatoes - onion sets
 bulk seeds flats of veggies
 flats of flowers
 shrubs- trees
 perennials
GODLEY'S COUNTRY FLORAL
 707 N. Pine River, Ithaca
 (989) 875-4118
 www.godleyscountryfloral.com

Taking Care of Life's "Little Breaks"
 AUTO • HOME • BUSINESS
 SCREENS - INSULATED UNITS
 CUSTOM CUTS - CONSTRUCTION
 FARM EQUIPMENT - STORM WINDOWS
Mobile Replacement & Repair
Fas-Break-Glass-Co.
 103 W. Washington St., St. Louis
 (989) 681-6126

FLOORING
 HUGE SELECTION
Vote for Us
Millard's
FURNITURE AND APPLIANCE
 DOWNTOWN STANTON | 989.831.8326 | Mon-Fri 8-6 | Sat 8-5:30
 CENTRAL MICHIGAN'S LARGEST FURNITURE, APPLIANCE AND FLOOR COVERING STORE

LUXURY VINYL PLANK FLOORING
 HEIRLOOM COLLECTION
 PROFESSIONAL & HIGHLY RATED INSTALLERS
 BEST PRICES & QUALITY
THE ORIGINAL MILLARD'S SINCE 1926, DOWNTOWN STANTON

GREAT BEDDING & MATTRESS
 OPTIONS TO CHOOSE FROM
 5-15 YEAR NON-PRO RATED WARRANTY
 MADE IN MICHIGAN
 BETTER RATINGS THAN THE COMPETITION