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County salutes its top vaccination providers, lifts emergency declaration

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By CALEB STRIGHT



MERCER — Mercer County Commissioner Scott Boyd (left) and chairman Commissioner Matt McConnell (center) present a proclamation to Allegheny Health Network, Grove City, President Dr. David Tuppence in honor of the hospital's vaccination efforts during the pandemic, as the county recognized some of the area's largest vaccinators Thursday. Photos by Caleb Stright/R-A

MERCER — Pennsylvania now has more than half of its adults fully vaccinated, Mercer County's COVID-19 case numbers have been down four of the last five weeks, and the county's commissioners provided a couple more signs Thursday that the pandemic is waning.

They held their first meeting without masks and repealed the county's declaration of emergency.

The county's chairman commissioner, Matt McConnell, said the decision to end the state of emergency came as more of the state opens and as a larger percentage of the population has

been vaccinated.

“It’s something we’ve been talking about for the last year,” he said. “We can’t let it go on forever.”

Although the state-level emergency powers of Gov. Tom Wolf have been the source of much debate – and two new Pa. constitutional amendments approved in Tuesday’s primary – the repealing of the county-level emergency was more symbolic than controversial.

The county leaders approved the emergency declaration March 19, 2020, saying it would allow them to move more quickly and be more flexible.

Specifically, as the county worked to acquire large quantities of personal protective equipment and other pandemic-related supplies to address the quickly evolving emergency, it allowed them to make purchases without having to wait until their next meeting to vote on them.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioner Matt McConnell (left) presents a proclamation to Walberg Family Pharmacies owner Bretton Walberg for his company’s efforts in vaccinating more than 37,000 local people.

Emergency provisions required that they report those purchases in the next meeting, which McConnell said, although they rarely had to utilize the provision, they were good at about reporting

“We were pretty good about self-policing,” he said.

With the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) making it optional for vaccinated people to wear masks, in addition to dropping the emergency declaration, commissioners also dropped their masks for the first time.

Commissioner Tim McGonigle offered one caveat, though: “We’re out of the emergency, but it’s not over.”

Commissioner Scott Boyd, though, said he’d like to see things open more quickly, and that although CDC guidance requires masks for unvaccinated people, that it should instead be done voluntarily.

The state announced Thursday that now more than half of Pennsylvania’s adults are fully vaccinated, which includes 37,041 in Mercer County.

The commissioners took time Thursday to recognize five of the organizations that have administered a large chunk of the 77,667 shots that have now gone out in the county.

Commissioners issued proclamations to Walberg Family Pharmacies, Sharon Regional Medical Center, Primary Health Network, UPMC and Allegheny Health Network, Grove City.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioner Tim McGonigle (left) presents a proclamation to Sharon Regional Medical Center President Robert Rogalski Thursday as commissioners recognized several vaccination providers in the county.

“This is not a total, inclusive list, but it is representative,” McConnell said. “This was really a call to arms for the entire community. It’s one thing Mercer County does really well is pull together.”

McConnell said hearing early projections that more than 60 percent of the county’s population could be infected with the virus, and that more than 5 percent could die, was one of the most challenging moments of his tenure.

“It really has been a true test, and we’ve been very fortunate compared to what we had seen as the original projections, and it was because of people like the ones on this list that pulled together,” he said. “It’s something that makes me really proud to be part of this community.”

“One of the most remarkable parts is that hospitals are already charged with so many things, that they were not only able to do the everyday work that they’re accustomed to doing, but they were able to deliver these vaccines,” McGonigle said.

“I’m very proud of the citizens, all the volunteers that ensured we got through this crisis as healthy as possible,” Boyd added, as they also highlighted the efforts of county first responders, those working in the courthouse that kept county government running and others.

As of Thursday, according to the state, Mercer County has seen 9,489 total cases since the start of the pandemic. The county has added 56 cases so far this week, down from 78 at the same time last week. The county added 130 cases last week, down from 144 the week before.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioner Tim McGonigle (left) and chairman Commissioner Matt McConnell (center) presents a proclamation to Primary Health Network Chief Medical Officer Dr. George Garrow Thursday, as commissioners recognized some of the county’s most prolific vaccinators.

Also at Thursday’s meeting: Officials continued to spread the word that the county has been awarded more than \$7 million to help tenants who have fallen behind on rent and the landlords that are waiting for those payments.

According to county Fiscal Administrator John Logan, as of Thursday, the county had paid out more than \$370,000 from the funding, but they’re still hearing from landlords – even some with

dozens of units – that are unaware the relief is available.

The program is designed for current tenants that are behind on rent and utility payments. Landlords are to be part of the process, and payments are made directly to landlords to help catch tenants up.

The county has set up an office to handle applications at 700 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Farrell, but Logan said applicants can also start the process by calling 211. n A group of Jefferson Township residents expressed their concerns about the possibility of a solar farm being built in their neighborhood.

Resident Ryan Gassner and others in the neighborhood were concerned about industrial fields of solar panels going into residential areas – he'd prefer to see them installed on brownfields or rooftops – and landowners signing contracts to lease their land without provisions that would require the solar companies to remove the panels and clean up after the limited lifespans of the panels expires.

The commissioners said they can't address zoning, which is set at the municipal level, but they've been keeping an eye on the issue.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioners recognize Walberg Family Pharmacies for the local company's efforts vaccinating residents. Representing Walberg pharmacies were owners Bretton and Stacey Walberg, Marcia Walberg, Dennis Walberg, Director of Pharmacy Operations Matt Shellenbarger, Jeff Steiner, pharmacist Randy Clark, Creative Director Misty Henry and Kylee Lewis, pharmacist and clinical care coordinator.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioners present a proclamation to representatives of UPMC Horizon and Jameson Thursday for their efforts vaccinating local people. Pictured are (back row, from left) commissioners Scott Boyd and Matt McConnell, and (front, from left) Horizon and Jameson President Rob Jackson, Director of Operations Kevin MacDonald and Commissioner Tim McGonigle.



MERCER – (Back row, from left) Mercer County Commissioners Scott Boyd, Matt Mc-Connell and Tim McGonigle present a proclamation to (front, from left) Allegheny Health Network, Grove City, Director of Operations Adam Critchlow and President Dr. David Tupponce for the hospital's efforts vaccinating county residents.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioners (back row, from left) Scott Boyd, Matt Mc-Connell and Tim McGonigle present a proclamation to Primary Health Network representatives (front, from left) Jennifer Wise, Ashlee Montgomery, Dr. George Garrow and Lindsey Ranelli, as they recognized some of the county's most prolific vaccinators Thursday.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioner Scott Boyd (left) presents a proclamation to Rob Jackson, president of UPMC Horizon and Jameson, for the system's efforts vaccinating local people as chairman Commissioner Matt McConnell (center), looks on.



MERCER – Mercer County Commissioners issued a proclamation to representatives of Sharon Regional Medical Center Thursday, thanking them for their efforts in helping to vaccinate the county. Pictured are (back row, from left) Commissioners Scott Boyd and Matt McConnell, as well as Sharon Regional Director of Education Services Michelle Schmader; and (front, from left) Sharon Regional Emergency Management Coordinator Corry Fenton, Director of Pharmacy Jodi Shrawder, President Robert Rogalski, Commissioner Tim McGonigle and David Shellenbarger, Sharon Regional's chief medical officer. Photo by Caleb Stright/R-A