

Governor Baker agrees to extend max length of unemployment benefits

Colin A. Young

State House News Service

Gov. Charlie Baker on Tuesday evening signed into law a suite of unemployment insurance relief measures that are aimed at helping employers and claimants during the coronavirus pandemic.

The bill signed into law (S 2618) includes an expansion of the maximum allowable claims period from 26 weeks to 30 weeks for any week in which claims exceed 100,000; a provision exempting employers' experience ratings from impacts of COVID-19 and the current state of emergency; and lifts a cap on dependency benefits that currently stands at 50 percent. The legislation bounced between the House and Senate in different versions since April and lawmakers got it to Baker's desk last week before Memorial Day weekend.

Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr last week said the bill includes "a number of important tools ... to help not only the integrity of the unemployment insurance system but also to help those who are dependent upon it, and for whom so many have become dependent as a result."

The state's unemployment rate surged to 15.1% in April as the state lost 623,000 jobs. Since March 15, Massachusetts labor officials have received more than 1.23 million new claims for traditional unemployment insurance or the expanded eligibility Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program.

Will the rise in New Bedford home prices result in higher taxes and rents?

With home values in New Bedford rising nearly 16% from a year ago, expect a significant increase in property taxes and rents in New Bedford in 2021.

Home sales in New Bedford during April were down 27% pushing home prices nearly 16% higher to \$257,500, up from \$223,000 in April 2019. As the supply of homes for sale in Massachusetts during the coronavirus shrinks, home values will continue to rise putting pressure on municipal budgets. Overall, **home sales in Massachusetts during April were down nearly 14% with the median home sale price rising nearly 12% compared to April of 2019.** Based on this data, New Bedford home prices increased nearly twice as much as the rest of the state.

Without the City of New Bedford significantly cutting spending or receiving large amounts of state/federal funding, property taxes will rise significantly over the next few years. Spending cuts are difficult as the vast majority of New Bedford's budget is non-discretionary, or required spending. From **New Bedford's FY 2020 budget:**

"86.9% of the General Fund budget is predetermined by state mandates and regional agreements, and nearly 60% of the city government's General Fund payroll consists of unionized public safety positions that are subject to binding arbitration. As a result, only a relatively small portion of the budget can be considered truly discretionary, and we remain challenged to support current service levels and maintain the City's

infrastructure.”



A simple translation: The State requires New Bedford to spend 87% of its budget on specific items like education, most of the leftover 13% goes to the unions and we are already struggling to balance the budget. And this was before coronavirus. Without federal money coming to the rescue, higher property taxes or cuts will follow and there is very little left to cut. Higher property taxes will mean increased rents for residents and businesses.

In the past two years, residential property taxes went up on average **\$220 in 2019** and **\$114 in 2020**. With **Massachusetts tax collections falling in April by more than \$2.3 billion compared to last April**, the state will not be coming to the rescue without the federal government stepping in.

If state and municipal bailouts by the federal government don't come this year, expect much higher than \$220 increases in your residential property tax in 2021. Another solution could be the state easing up on non-discretionary spending rules, but it's political suicide in Massachusetts to cut spending on education, pensions, health insurance, police, and fire which makes up the bulk of New Bedford's budget. It's either the federal government or the residential/commercial property taxpayer to the rescue, or more likely both.

New Bedford officials report

three more COVID-19 related deaths on Wednesday

New Bedford officials reported three additional COVID-19 related deaths since Tuesday bringing the total to 64.

Mayor Jon Mitchell's office reported one additional confirmed COVID-19 cases in New Bedford on Wednesday, bringing the total positive cases in the city to 1,758, **up from 1,758 on Tuesday**. The City of New Bedford reports there is a delay in coronavirus cases today.

15 additional cases of COVID-19 have been identified in Fall River, according to Mayor Coogan. This brings the total in Fall River to 1,196. Full details **here**.

State education officials intend to provide school districts with guidance on summer programming early next week, followed by a mid-June distribution of draft fall guidance to help schools plan to reopen in the new academic year. Full details **here**.

Massachusetts home sales down almost 14% in April

Michael P. Norton
State House News Service

Home sales in Massachusetts during April were down nearly 14%, although buyers and sellers wrapped up 3,706 sales agreements while the state grappled with a surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths and as residents largely stayed home and away from

shuttered workplaces.

According to The Warren Group, single-family home sales fell 13.7 percent in April, compared to April 2019, but the median home sale price jumped nearly 12 percent to \$428,000, up from \$383,000 in April 2019. That was the highest median sale price ever recorded for April.

It was the biggest drop in home sales since April 2011, when sales slid 26.8 percent and the median home sale price was \$271,000.

Sales drops were most pronounced last month in Hampden and Suffolk counties, where the volume was off by 30 percent, and in Barnstable and Berkshire counties, which were down more than 20 percent.

“The number of single-family home sales took a significant hit in April as the effects of COVID-19 started to impact the local housing market and economy,” said Tim Warren, CEO of The Warren Group. “This comes as no surprise. I fully expected transactions to stall as the stay-at-home order continues to keep both buyers and sellers on the sidelines.”

The state’s plan for phased business reopenings might lead to a “return of confidence” and more in-person home shopping this summer, Warren said, noting the “strong demand” for homes as evidenced by the median sale price increase.

Condo sales fell 19 percent in April, The Warren Group said, with the median condo sale price rising 13.8 percent to \$421,000, another record for April.

Home and condo sales are both up for the year through April, with the median home sale price at \$400,000 and the median condo sale price at \$415,000.

Warren requests U.S. Commission on Civil Rights examine Federal Government's response to COVID-19 impact in Indian Country

United States Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Congresswoman Deb Haaland (D-N.M.), Co-Chair of the Congressional Native American Caucus and the first Native woman to preside over the House floor during the 116th Congress, wrote to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) requesting an update to the findings and recommendations of its report, Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans, in light of the ongoing impacts the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) is having on Native Nations across the United States.

The Broken Promises report, issued in December 2018, concluded that federal programs designed to support the social and economic wellbeing of tribal nations and Native peoples remain chronically underfunded and often inefficiently structured. That was before the pandemic; federal action to empower the United States' 574 federally recognized Native Nations and uphold trust and treaty responsibilities is more important than ever.

"The Administration's failure to uphold the trust responsibility to provide adequate relief, health services, and public safety resources to tribal communities has exacerbated the pandemic's impact. This failure requires the

Commission's voice," wrote Warren and Haaland in their letter.

The White House reportedly opposed the provision of direct aid to tribal governments in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act aid that is crucial for tribal nations to provide needed government services to their citizens. After a push by Senate Democrats and the Congressional Native American Caucus, the CARES Act provided this aid under the Coronavirus Relief Fund. However, after the enactment of the law, the Department of the Treasury delayed disbursement of the funds for weeks and the Administration initially excluded important tribal businesses from the CARES Act's Paycheck Protection Program.

The federal response to the health care aspects of the crisis—particularly a lack of funding for the Indian Health Service (IHS)—has also fallen short of what Indian Country needs. The Broken Promises report noted that per capita IHS health care expenditures in 2017 were \$3,332, compared to \$9,207 per person for federal health care spending nationally. Since the pandemic, the situation has only gotten worse. Tribal nations and urban Indian organizations have had to navigate red tape in order to receive desperately needed supplies and relief funds. The pandemic, coupled with inadequate federal funding, has contributed to the devastation of Nation Nations' economies, and has prevented tribal citizens from accessing healthcare, education, and employment.

Warren and Haaland asked the USCCR to examine in particular how the problems identified in the Broken Promises report have been exacerbated by the pandemic, if the Congressional and Executive Branch responses have done enough to help Native people, and the impact of the lack of wireless networks on tribal land and other inequities in health care, education, voting rights, economic development and more.

In response to the Broken Promises report, Haaland and Warren released a legislative proposal last year to address chronic

underfunding and barriers to sovereignty in Indian Country and hold the federal government accountable for honoring America's legal promises to Native peoples. They coauthored an op-ed in Indian Country Today about the significance of the Broken Promises report, and the need for bold action in response. This week, they coauthored an op-ed in the Washington Post about COVID-19's impact in Indian Country and how it underscores the need for the federal government to take decisive action to empower Native Nations.

2020.05.26 Letter to U.S. Commission on Civil Rights re. COVID-19 impacts on Indian Country

The goal is to have Massachusetts schools “up and running” in Fall

Katie Lannan

State House News Service

State education officials intend to provide school districts with guidance on summer programming early next week, followed by a mid-June distribution of draft fall guidance to help schools plan to reopen in the new academic year.

“I want to be clear, we are working to have schools up and running in the fall, with appropriate safety protocols,” commissioner Jeff Riley said during a Board of Elementary and Secondary Education meeting Tuesday. “Moreover, we hope to have some summer programming as well, but as with all, we will await the guidance from the administration on the timeline and the phases and when things are available.”

Schools across Massachusetts were shuttered in mid-March as the state prepared for a surge in COVID-19 cases, forcing teachers, students and their families to abruptly transition into a new, at-home learning model.

Under an order from Gov. Charlie Baker, K-12 schools will remain closed for the rest of this academic year. Education Secretary James Peyser told lawmakers earlier this month that there is “no question” remote learning will be a large part of planning for the new school year and said that even if students return to classrooms in a “quasi-normal fashion,” officials need to “be better prepared for the possibility that in-person education will be interrupted again.”

With the state now in the first phase of the Baker administration’s four-stage reopening plan, Riley has convened his own working group to help develop a reentry plan for Massachusetts schools.

The group held its first meeting on May 7, Riley wrote in a message to school districts, and its initial focus will be on what summer programming might be possible.

The members come from organizations representing school counselors, police and fire chiefs, charter schools, educational collaboratives, school committee members, school administrators, school nurses and facilities administrators, as well as from the Department of Public Health, the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, the School Building Authority, the state’s two main teachers unions, the Massachusetts Parent Teachers Association, and the Student Advisory Council.

Riley said the group feels “a sense of urgency” in its work, aware that districts need to know what to plan for, but wants to balance that with “making sure that stakeholders have a chance to weigh in on our plan.”

“We recognize that maybe not everyone’s going to be happy, but

we think we'll do better by making sure that everyone is involved in the process," he said.

According to Riley's May 14 message to school leaders, the working group "will help develop a K-12 summer and fall restart and recovery plan" that will include guidance on teaching and learning; physical and virtual learning environments; operations and business services; and behavioral health and social and emotional learning.

Board member Matt Hills said that in his hometown of Newton, there is great interest in the work the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is doing around reopening. He said the department suddenly "gets mentioned all the time."

"I can't imagine not having a plan to reopen the schools, and the governor will ultimately make the decision, but I think it's terrific you're doing it, and it's hitting in places that don't normally say, 'We can't wait to hear what DESE says' on something," Hills said.

In addition to uncertainty around what a fall term will look like, local school districts and municipal governments are still facing an unknown budget picture. The pandemic upended the traditional Beacon Hill budget cycle, and economists have projected that state revenue collections for the fiscal year that begins July 1 will be billions of dollars below original projections.

Without knowing what they are likely to receive in state aid, it's difficult for municipalities to set their own budgets, said Bill Bell, the education department's senior associate commissioner for administration and finance. Bell said he did not have any "magic answers" for the board on the state budget picture.

Riley said budget writers on Beacon Hill are still trying to figure out how much revenue will be coming in.

"Obviously we'd like to see some directionality about local aid sooner rather than later to help schools plan, and to prevent major disruption over the summer, but I think people are still trying to make the picture a little less fuzzy," he said.

Hills said his view is that it's "probably beyond crazy for individual districts to think there's going to be any increase in Chapter 70 and circuit breaker funding over last year."

"I don't know what level, but realistically, when the state's expenses are ballooning and revenue's sort of dramatically declining, it probably means that large budget accounts are likely to go down, unless money just falls from heaven or from the federal government," he said. "Is that a pessimistic view or a realistic view, understanding we just don't know?"

Bell said it was hard to say, and that additional federal relief funding is "one of the big things that might be able to soften some of the revenue loss" at the state and local level.

The budget Baker filed in January included a \$304 million increase in Chapter 70 state aid to local schools, reflecting a November 2019 law that called for a \$1.5 billion in new K-12 education funding over seven years.

Bell said he does not know if that level of aid will end up being "sustainable" in the fiscal 2021 budget, but that he believes "it's everyone's desire to try to get to that level."

Vice Chair James Morton asked if there is a role for the board to play in advocating for education funding.

"K-12 education specifically, education broadly, is at the top of everybody's priority list, so I don't think anyone is missing the importance of education to this year's budget and to the future of the commonwealth as a whole," Peyser said.

Southcoast Health COVID-19 surge hospital at UMass Dartmouth to close

The 98-bed facility was constructed to guard the region against a spring surge.

The Southcoast Health COVID-19 surge hospital located in the Tripp Athletic Center at UMass Dartmouth has closed. The hospital was built in partnership with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to safeguard the capacity of the region's hospitals during the COVID-19 spring surge. No patients were admitted to the hospital.

Southcoast Health and MEMA are currently removing all medical equipment from the site and the entire facility will be professionally cleaned. The cleaning process is expected to finish on June 1, 2020.

New Bedford officials report two COVID-19 related deaths, 73 new cases since Saturday

New Bedford officials reported two additional COVID-19 related deaths since Saturday bringing the total to 61.

Mayor Jon Mitchell's office reported 73 additional confirmed

COVID-19 cases in New Bedford on Tuesday, bringing the total positive cases in the city to 1,757 , **up from 1,673 on Saturday.**

20 additional cases of COVID-19 have been identified in Fall River, according to the Mayor's Office. This brings the total in Fall River to 1,181. The death toll from the coronavirus in Fall River remains at 26. Full details **here.**

Mayor Jon Mitchell announced that the City of New Bedford has launched MaskNB, an initiative in partnership with the American Red Cross and Joseph Abboud Manufacturing Corporation, to continue to promote the widespread use of masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by offering a mask to any City resident who wants one at no cost, at a series of drive-through distribution events in late May and June. Full details **here.**

The Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles announced it will be implementing further extensions to the renewal timelines for expiring professional credentials, and licenses and permits, including Commercial Driver's Licenses and Commercial Driver's License Permits (CDLs / CLPs). Full details **here.**

New state guidance allows for high schools to hold in-person, outdoor graduation ceremonies starting July 19, with certain safety precautions in place and as long as public health data around COVID-19 allows the state to continue along its reopening plan. Full details **here.**

New Bedford Symphony

Orchestra presents FREE live-stream “Jesse Holstein Bach-Talk with Talk-Bach”

On Wednesday, May 27, 7pm tune in on the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra website or on Facebook for a LIVE STREAM of Bach-Talk with Talk-Bach with NBSO concertmaster Jesse Holstein.

The first known edition of Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin dates from 1720 while he was employed at the court of Anhalt-Cothen in Germany. These works greatly expanded the musical, technical, and harmonic possibilities of the violin, which was largely used as a singularly melodic instrument up to that point. With these works, Bach revolutionized both solo violin music and violin playing beyond measure.

Please join Jesse for a deep-dive into their genesis and history through the lens of the final Partita in E-major. (He might even do some very bad baroque dance moves to illustrate the rhythm of the movements. Please don’t let that be a deterrent!)

This Bach-Talk will include a “Talk-Bach” where you can type in questions and comments.

You have two options to view this live stream. The live videos will not appear until very close to 7pm, and it is possible that the performance may start a bit late.

Option 1: If you have a Facebook account, go to the NBSO Facebook Live Videos page where you will see current and past live videos. Click on “Bach-Talk with Talk-Bach” to open the post so that you can comment and see others’ comments.

Option 2: Go to our website and look for the Events tab, then Upcoming Events, and click on “Bach-Talk with Talk-Bach” Simply scroll down to find the video.

All of our live stream performances can be viewed afterward in either place.



Sophomores would take MCAS tests as juniors under new

plan

Katie Lannan

State House News Service

Current high school sophomores, who missed their first chance to take the grade 10 English and math MCAs exams this spring amid COVID-19 school closures, will instead likely be given the tests this winter, as 11th graders, under a plan set to be discussed at a Board of Elementary and Secondary Education meeting Tuesday afternoon.

In a memo to board members, Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley said administering the 10th grade tests to 11th graders next school year would give members of the class of 2022 the ability to earn the competency determination (CD) required for high school graduation and to qualify for scholarships based on their test scores. The test schedule “will be announced shortly,” and officials “will work to balance the need to provide an opportunity to earn the CD with the uncertainties about school schedules and conditions next year,” the memo said.

Students in the class of 2023, who will be sophomores in the fall, will take their 10th grade tests in the spring, as is usual, and next year’s seniors will have two opportunities for English and math re-tests if they have not yet earned their competency determinations, Riley wrote. “We recognize that the situation for next school year may change depending on the evolving nature of the pandemic,” he wrote. “We will reassess as needed and keep the Board and the public informed about any changes.”

The board plans to meet remotely at 2 p.m., and the agenda includes an update on action steps related to COVID-19. Riley has convened a 27-member working group to help develop “a K-12 summer and fall restart and recovery plan” after a spring of

remote learning.