

Governor Baker lifts ban on golfing in Massachusetts

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Gov. Charlie Baker is ready to let people tee off in Massachusetts again.

The administration updated a COVID-19 essential services webpage Thursday morning and said that while golf courses are not considered essential businesses, “private operators of golf courses may permit individuals access to the property so long as there are no gatherings of any kind...”

The new rules require that “appropriate social distancing of six feet between individuals is strictly followed” and groups will be limited to four golfers, as is traditional.

The updated guidance also allows municipal golf courses to open, but all courses must comply with a strict set of restrictions – including a ban on caddies and golf carts and the mandate that courses have hand sanitizer readily available.

Golfers have become vocal about their desire to get back on the links, and their frustration that the governor consistently encouraged people to get outside and get exercise, but did not seem to give real credence to the idea that golf could be a safe, distant activity.

“We’re not a warm weather state. It’s been winter for the most part. I get the fact that there are golfers who like to golf in the winter. But if you were to say to me do I think that golfing in the winter would be considered an essential thing to be doing at a point in time when we were closing down thousands and thousands and thousands of other non-essential

businesses in Massachusetts? My answer to that would be no," Baker said last week.

The governor was responding to a question from online golf columnist Tom Gorman, who recently dubbed the governor "Golf's Grim Reaper."

Of the states that closed golf courses at the start of the pandemic, Massachusetts was the last to allow the sport to resume.

"Things have gotten testy at times in Massachusetts as eager golfers have clamored their state government for golf courses to reopen," Golf Advisor, which tracks the status of courses around the country, wrote Thursday morning.

Under the new guidance, golf courses can identify staff to serve as security personnel and enforce social distancing, but no other employees may work the "recreational component" of the golf operation. Groundskeeping has been allowed throughout the pandemic. Golfers will have to pay either online or via a remote payment method.

Players must wait in their car until 15 minutes before their tee time, and courses are required to keep practice greens and driving ranges closed. Tee times must be at least 15 minutes apart, according to the guidance.

Everyone must use their own clubs. Flag sticks must remain in the hole at all times, there will be no rakes to tidy bunkers, and courses must remove or cover ball washers. Once the round is over, players must immediately return to their cars.

There will be no 19th hole – clubhouses, pro shops, restaurants and other facilities must remain closed, under the new rules.