

Pandemic, Recession Forecasts Will Jolt Massachusetts State Budget

By Michael P. Norton
State House News Service

State tax collections in the current fiscal year could fall as much as \$500 million below benchmarks due to lost economic activity and the Legislature should act now to prepare for a downturn or the “significant likelihood” of a recession, the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation said Tuesday.

Calling on lawmakers to quickly revise revenue assumptions, the business-backed foundation said the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic will add to existing challenges associated with plans to ramp up education spending in a few months and tax law changes already scheduled to take effect.

A tax cut to spur charitable giving will kick in soon and retailers, hit hard by virus impacts, are facing additional increases in the minimum wage. And it’s not just tax revenues that are taking a hit: MBTA fare revenues are down due to fewer riders and gaming revenues are suffering due to closed casinos.

As the pandemic unfolds, lawmakers should prioritize emergency response spending to meet the challenges and curtail “non-essential” spending in the fiscal 2020 budget as well as the fiscal 2021 budget that’s currently under development, MTF said.

“Public health remains the paramount concern,” foundation President Eileen McAnneny said in a statement. “The impact on the Massachusetts economy and the state’s finances is unknown at this point but significant. In the coming months and years,

the state will be pressured to increase spending to respond to the crisis while revenues decline as a result of dramatically reduced economic activity.”

Over the first eight months of fiscal 2020, the state has collected \$18.428 billion in tax revenues, which were running 1 percent, or \$176 million, above the year-to-date benchmark through February and 5.2 percent above the same period in fiscal 2019. March collections will start reflecting the damage.

The length and depth of a recession “cannot yet be quantified,” MTF said, and the impact of fiscal 2021 revenues falling by 3 to 5 percent would range from \$2 billion to \$3 billion.

Separately from MTF, the editorial board of MassBenchmarks reported Tuesday that a global recession is a “virtual certainty” and its depth and length “will be driven by the evolution of the virus which will affect when people can resume their normal activities.” Board members reached their conclusion following a recent virtual meeting, its first ever, to honor the need for social distancing due to the growing public health threat presented by COVID-19.

The state has about \$3.5 billion built up in its rainy day savings account, a cash stash that was built up in case the state ran into difficulties. Fiscal assistance from the federal government could also help states to deal with the coronavirus fight.

“The state currently has a substantial rainy-day fund which could provide an important source of resources,” MassBenchmarks officials wrote in their new report. “But the state government is obliged to balance its budget and significant federal financial support will be essential to minimizing the economic disruption and human suffering associated with this crisis. Of particular importance will be

efforts to ensure the continued health of municipal and state bond markets and support for households experiencing income disruption as a result of the pandemic and its aftermath.”

In January, the Baker administration and Democratic legislative leaders agreed to base fiscal 2021 budget proposals on the assumption that tax revenues will grow a modest 2.8 percent. The agreement came weeks after legislators allocated a \$1 billion state budget surplus and it coincided with an announcement that the Baker administration was slightly boosting its revenue base for the fiscal 2020 budget.

The big budgetary decisions will likely be made by Baker, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, Senate President Karen Spilka, Administration and Finance Secretary Michael Heffernan, Senate Ways and Means Chairman Michael Rodrigues and House Ways and Means Chairman Aaron Michlewitz.

In January, Baker proposed a \$44.6 billion fiscal 2021 budget that featured big investments in education and public transit. Michlewitz, a North End Democrat, is now under pressure to revise Baker’s budget to deal with the changed circumstances.

“Managing the state’s finances is a key responsibility for policymakers in normal circumstances,” McAnneny said. “In extraordinary times like these, the fiscal decisions made during this time take on heightened importance as they will determine how well the state bounces back from this crisis.”

Freetown sees first case of

COVID-19

According to the Town of Freetown, a resident in Freetown has tested presumptive positive for COVID-19. The town said in a statement that the resident is currently in quarantine now and has been for a few days now.

The Town wanted to remind residents to make sure they are practicing good social distancing, washing hands regularly, using hand sanitizer when thorough washing isn't a possibility, avoiding face touching, coughing into an elbow and staying home from work when not well.

It is also important to call your primary care physician or local emergency room if you feel you meet the criteria for testing; do not simply show up to the office.

Mansfield and Easton have also confirmed cases. Today the Massachusetts Department of Public Health stated that there were 5 confirmed cases in Bristol County and 218 in the state.

Massachusetts Governor Baker to State: "Tough Days Ahead of Us"

By Katie Lannan
State House News Service

Cautioning of tough days ahead, state officials said Tuesday they are pursuing multiple ways to ramp up the capacity for coronavirus testing in Massachusetts and outlined several other new initiatives to address ramifications of the

pandemic.

Gov. Charlie Baker on Tuesday: "Without question, we are likely to have some very tough days ahead of us."

Gov. Charlie Baker, in an afternoon press conference, announced the distribution of \$5 million in emergency funds to local boards of health, along with new emergency orders he said will "cut red tape so hospitals can staff up faster," adjust minimum standards for ambulance staffing to maintain EMS availability, and facilitate telehealth services across state lines to help keep people out of hospitals in non-emergency situations.

The number of COVID-19 cases reported by public health officials in Massachusetts rose from 197 to 218 on Tuesday, including 21 hospitalizations. At least 33 of the cases involved local transmission, according to the Department of Public Health.

Baker said he is also formally requesting that the Small Business Administration issue a declaration of economic injury for Massachusetts to make low-interest loans available to small business owners affected by the outbreak. That move follows the governor's announcement Monday of a new \$10 million recovery loan fund for small businesses.

Baker said he was also glad to see federal officials "talking earlier today about a major recovery package." He said he expects to see "a significant spike" in the number of Massachusetts residents applying for and receiving unemployment benefits.

"Without question, we are likely to have some very tough days ahead of us as we are still at the beginning of the battle against this virus," Baker said. "But we continue to have great faith and confidence that we will get through this by pulling together, caring for one another, and doing what's right for our neighbors and our communities, because that is

who we are.”

Baker said he’d like to see “way more testing” for the coronavirus than is currently available, both to determine where the most significant challenges are and to plan for the future.

State health officials continue to encourage residents to engage in social distancing practices. Public Health Commissioner Dr. Monica Bharel said doing so “is a way for each one of us to have an impact on the outcome of the disease.”

“And I know it is challenging for your family and mine to do it, but it is critical in assisting us in flattening the curve,” she said.

Tuesday marked the first day of a new set of widespread closures in the Bay State. Under emergency orders from Baker, schools are shut down for at least three weeks, while restaurants are limited to takeout and delivery only. Most gatherings of 25 or more people are banned, and many people across the state are now working from home, often while juggling childcare responsibilities.

Executive branch employees will receive new telework guidance Tuesday, Baker said. He also said he does not currently have plans to order a statewide ban on regular construction activity like the citywide suspension Boston Mayor Martin Walsh imposed Monday.

Baker opened his remarks Tuesday by reiterating that he is not planning to issue a statewide shelter-in-place order, saying that rumors persist despite his past denials. He stressed the need to obtain information from reliable sources – “not from your friend’s friend’s friend’s friend’s neighbor” – and urged grocery shoppers to “use common sense and moderation and avoid hoarding large quantities.”

At around the same time Baker began his press conference, a group of 10 state representatives and local officials from Cambridge and Somerville sent him a letter urging the governor to follow the lead of communities in California's Bay Area and order that Massachusetts residents stay home except for trips related to essential needs.

The group asked Baker to issue a shelter-in-place order by the end of the day, saying it's "essential that the spread of the virus be suppressed to protect the ability of healthcare providers to handle the influx of new patients and safeguard public health and safety."

Baker said that managing the spread of the illness is "going to come down here in Massachusetts to the work that everybody does collectively to deal with social distancing and to the extent that they possibly can, not being part of the spread, because that's going to be the mechanism that ultimately determines where the peak is and where it comes down.

The governor's new emergency orders on health care will allow the reactivation of licenses of physicians who have retired within the last year in good standing, and allow providers in other states to obtain emergency licenses to practice in person or through telemedicine.

They also stipulate that no doctor, nurse, social worker or psychologist will be prohibited from using telemedicine across state lines to care for their patients who have been enrolled this year in Massachusetts colleges or universities, which have largely moved to remote learning and sent students home.

The state is also "working all avenues to rapidly increase" capacity to test for the virus, said Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders, who is leading a COVID-19 response command center.

Baker said he would like to see more testing, in part to assist the command center in its ongoing "scenario planning"

efforts with the medical community around what the ultimate demand for care might look like.

“From my point of view, I would like to see us test way more than we’ve tested up until now,” he said. “I mean, first of all testing is an important way of determining where you have your most significant issues and challenges, and secondly, it’s also something you can use as scenario planning.”

Sudders said she spoke Tuesday with local companies PerkinElmer and Thermo Fisher Scientific, who have both committed to help the state in testing. She said officials believe the Broad Institute, a partnership between Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, could serve as a state reference lab, with Thermo Fisher test kits.

“If we’re successful, the Broad Institute would be able to test almost 1,000 kits per day,” she said. “The PerkinElmer CEO has offered to supply the state lab with a testing machine and supplies with additional capacity for almost 1,000 tests per day.”

The command center is also “matchmaking” between academic medical centers that have machine capacity and companies that produce test kits and supplies, Sudders said.

The state public health laboratory had conducted 1,367 tests as of Tuesday morning, yielding 197 positive results. That number is up from 1,092 on Monday. Commercial labs Quest Diagnostics and LabCorp have reported a total of 384 tests, including 13 positives.

Testing numbers had previously been released on a weekly schedule, and Bharel said the new goal is to update those figures daily along with the number of cases.

Bharel said the state lab is able to test 400 patients a day, up from an original 200 a day, and maintains adequate supplies. She said the administration’s goal “is to continue

to increase our testing capability as quickly and as safely as we can.”

“But I understand that it is not at the fast pace that we would all prefer,” she said. “Some of this is due to federal level shortages that Massachusetts and many other states are facing. We are moving as quickly as we can.”

Massachusetts State Rep. Joe Kennedy proposes relief to Americans in the form of a \$4,000 check

Today at a news conference and on his own Twitter page, Rep. Joe Kennedy proposed “...an immediate economic relief plan for every American” due to the effects of COVID-19.

His proposal consisted of sending a bailout check of \$4,000 to every American adult who makes under \$100,000 as well as \$1,000 to each child 18-years old and under.

Those who make \$100,000 or more are not left out: they would receive a check of \$2,000.

Rep. Kennedy said “An unprecedented pandemic demands an unprecedented response from our government. We need to ensure every family has the funds to survive at this moment and we need to put cash directly in the hands of every American” and he declared that these checks be sent “immediately.”

In addition to this, he suggested immediate unemployment insurance and a historic investment in Medicaid.

Immigrants' Assistance Center temporarily suspended all in-person services

To protect the health and safety of clients, volunteers, staff and the wider community, the Immigrants' Assistance Center, Inc. (IAC) has temporarily suspended in-person services during the Massachusetts state of emergency, effective Tuesday, March 17, 2020. In-person services will resume when federal, state and local health officials advise it can be done safely.

□In addition, the IAC has taken the following steps:

Case managers are available during regular business hours for phone consultations with clients, and for limited in-person meetings regarding emergency health-related cases.

Client education and informational resources about COVID-19 are a top priority, with guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community-mitigation-strategy.pdf> being provided in multiple languages.

To ensure the health and safety of staff and clients who come into the office for emergency meetings, screening for COVID-19 symptoms is underway, as is hand-washing before and after meetings, and thoroughly cleaning and sanitizing throughout and at the end of the day.

Communication is ongoing with USCIS to make sure all clients' due process rights are protected.

There will be an immediate impact placed on the IAC's resources to help with client needs, as the ramifications of COVID-19 will hit immigrant families very hard. Many of the IAC's clients are elderly and socially isolated, lack health insurance, paid sick days, child-care, and language skills to navigate complex and constantly shifting recommendations. Many are likely to lose their jobs.

The IAC is prepared to support immigrant families as we have for over 47 years, and is grateful to donors and supporters for making it possible to continue doing so during the unique circumstances of this public health crisis.

Wareham Police release Public Service Announcement in light of COVID-19

Due to the declared state of emergency with regard to the COVID-19 virus we are limiting public access to our station. A sign has been placed on the front door which reads the following:

Due to the declared state of emergency with regard to the COVID-19 virus we are asking the public to not enter the front lobby of the police station unless you have an emergency or an appointment.

If you need to file a report or speak to an officer please utilize your cell phone from your vehicle by calling 508-295-1212.

In the event you do enter the lobby, please refrain from

touching the counter and utilize the phone in the lobby by dialing extension 2269.

The Records Office is also closed; to obtain a police or accident report please email your request to records@warehampolice.com or call 508-295-8023 and the report will be mailed to you.

In addition, the Wareham Police Department will not be accepting any applications for renewal or new LTC or FID cards inside the station until further notice. Renewal applications will be accepted by mail only with copies of the following documents;

1. Copy of Massachusetts Driver's License.
2. Copy of birth certificate or passport.
3. Proof of residency- copy of utility bill, cell phone bill or bank statement.
4. Check made payable to the Town of Wareham for \$100.00

The members of the Wareham Police Department thank the public for their cooperation during this public health emergency.

**Massachusetts DPH announces
that Mass 211 will now
provide real-time COVID-19
info, resources, and
referrals**

With a lot of uncertainties in the upcoming days and weeks, we

wanted to remind all service providers about Mass 211, which is the 24/7 statewide information and referral line available in 140+ languages that connects callers with critical social service programs and organizations in their local community year-round.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) has announced that Massachusetts 211 will now provide real-time COVID-19 information, resources, and referrals. Mass 211 is made possible by local United Ways and the state of Massachusetts.

Through this partnership with Mass 211, DPH subject matter experts are expanding access to information 24/7, and empowering call operators to provide the latest information about the status of COVID-19 response efforts in Massachusetts. At peak call times, DPH staff will augment the call team to ensure residents' questions are answered without delay. This new service is in addition to a dedicated site mass.gov/covid19, which is updated daily with information and resources.

Residents across the state can call 2-1-1 to learn more about:

- COVID-19 prevention, symptoms, and treatment
- Information about testing
- Guidance for people planning or returning from travel

Mass 211 also operates the Call2Talk hotline for mental health, emotional support, and suicide prevention. Call2Talk also operates 24/7 and provides confidential, compassionate listening to assist people during stressful times.

Mass 211 can be reached by dialing 2-1-1 from any landline or cell phone in the state.

In addition to the services provided by Mass 211, United Way of Greater New Bedford has launched the Help United Fund to assist those locally affected by Coronavirus. We are currently

exploring ways to get financial support to those who need it. We welcome your suggestions and welcome your promotion of this effort. Donations can be made by texting HELPUNITED to 313131 or visiting unitedwayofgnb.org.

Four charged with Fentanyl trafficking and gun sale in southeastern Massachusetts

Four individuals were arrested today on charges that they distributed large quantities of fentanyl throughout southeastern Massachusetts.

Filomeno Monteiro, 30, of Brockton; Christina Collins, 18, of Brockton; Eric Marques, 29, of Brockton; and Chayia Chan, 28, of Lynn, were charged in three separate drug trafficking and firearm indictments.

Specifically, Monteiro and Collins were charged with conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute 40 grams or more of fentanyl as well as three counts of distribution of fentanyl. Monteiro was also charged with being a felon in possession of a firearm. Marques and Chan were each charged with distribution of 40 grams or more of fentanyl.

The charge of conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute 40 grams or more of fentanyl provides for a mandatory minimum sentence of five years and a maximum term of 40 years in prison, a minimum of four years of supervised release and a fine of up to \$5 million. The charge of distribution of fentanyl provides for a penalty of up to 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a

fine of up to \$1 million. The charge of being a felon in possession of a firearm and ammunition provides for a penalty of up to 10 years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of up to \$250,000. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based on the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

United States Attorney Andrew E. Lelling; Jason Molina, Acting Special Agent in Charge of Homeland Security Investigations in Boston; Colonel Christopher Mason, Superintendent of the Massachusetts State Police; Brockton Police Chief Emanuel Gomes; John Gibbons, U.S. Marshal for the District of Massachusetts; and Plymouth County District Attorney Timothy Cruz, made the announcement today. Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher Pohl of Lelling's Narcotics and Money Laundering Unit is prosecuting these cases.

The details contained in the indictments are allegations. The defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

United Way of Greater New Bedford Launches COVID-19 Help United Fund

United Way of Greater New Bedford is establishing the Help United Fund to be activated in times of crisis including the current COVID-19 pandemic. This fund is a dedicated resource for working families and organizations affected by the COVID-19.

Mobilizing United Way's broad network of nonprofit agencies,

the Help United Fund will provide a flexible source of cash assistance to help families and organizations through this crisis.

“On the SouthCoast, many families are one paycheck away from severe hardship,” said Michelle N. Hantman, President & CEO of United Way of Greater New Bedford. “We’ve been monitoring the COVID-19 situation and over the weekend we’ve seen the closures of schools and workplaces throughout the communities we serve. These closures carry with them an unprecedented financial hardship for hourly, low-wage workers. At United Way, we are preparing to help residents in any way we can.”

In Massachusetts, 2 in 5 workers lack sufficient savings to withstand a sudden loss of wages. Additionally, many nonprofit agencies will face financial disruption. Postponed or cancelled fundraising events lead to a loss of funding that community-based organizations depend on. This support is crucial to their regular program work and operations and will put serious pressure on nonprofit operating budgets. United Way has already postponed one fundraising event itself and may have to postpone others.

United Way is committed to serving the needs of Greater New Bedford through the Help United Fund. You can join United Way’s efforts by making a donation to the Help United Fund by texting **HELPUNITED** to 313131 or visiting unitedwayofgnb.org.

During this uncertain time, United Way of Greater New Bedford’s Hunger Commission will continue operations to ensure local pantries and shelters are receiving food for an uptick in client needs and Mass 211, a United Way program, is collaborating with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, to provide consumer help during the COVID-19 public health emergency. This free, confidential hotline provides information on programs and services year-round, but will also now serve as a comprehensive source of information and referrals related to COVID-19 in the coming weeks. Anyone

looking for information on prevention, symptoms, treatment, testing, or what to do if returning from travel should call Mass 211 by simply dialing 2-1-1 from a landline or cell phone.

For more information, visit unitedwayofgnb.org.

City of New Bedford facilities will close to public access from 17-22 March

Mayor Jon Mitchell has announced that City facilities will be closed to public access, beginning Tuesday, March 17, through at least Sunday, March 22. With the growing threat posed by the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), City government has begun to shift to a mode of service delivery that minimizes face-to-face interaction.

While facilities are closed to the public, City employees will still report to work, and will be available to address the public's needs by phone or email. The City agencies are arranging for employees to work remotely where feasible.

To be clear, this order applies to the New Bedford Public Library branches and the Buttonwood Park Zoo. The New Bedford Regional Airport will remain open, with restrictions on ordinary public access.

In addition, public and private events at City facilities have been cancelled or postponed through April 12.

Later this week, the City will make further announcements about limitations to public access to city facilities after March 22.

Last week, the City announced that senior centers were closed until further notice. The New Bedford Public Schools are closed through at least April 7.

Residents are strongly encouraged to pay bills remotely

City residents are encouraged to pay any bills by mail, by phone, or online. Payments can be made online at the City's website, www.newbedford-ma.gov, and selecting 'Pay Bills' directly on the home page. To mail payments, residents can use the mailing address printed on their bills or mail their bills directly to the City Treasurer at the following address:

City Hall – Treasurer's Office
133 William Street, Room 103
New Bedford, MA 02740

Fees/surcharges and interest waived through end of March

In order to encourage remote payment, residents paying by credit/debit cards during the period in which in-person payment is unavailable will have the convenience fee refunded or credited to their account. The days in which in-person payment are unavailable will not be counted in calculating late fees or interest.

Anyone with questions about paying bills remotely should contact the Treasurer's Office at 508-979-1430.

Traffic violation tickets

The Traffic Commission office in the Elm Street Garage will be closed to the public. Any payments related to the Traffic Commission can be made online, by phone, or in the payment kiosk in the lobby of the office in the Elm Street Garage.

Residents can still call City departments directly

Anyone who has any business with City departments should contact the department by phone. A listing of telephone numbers for frequently visited departments is below.

As always, for emergencies, residents should call 911.

For non-emergency business with the Police Department, please use their business line at 508-991-6300. For non-emergency business with the Fire Department, please use their business line at 508-991-6124.

For business with the Health Department, please call 508-991-6199.

Meetings of Boards, Commissions and City Council

Meetings of the City's boards and commissions from March 17 through March 31 will be postponed. The City Council will hold its regular meetings on March 26 and April 9, closed to the public but streamed live online at New Bedford Cable Network's Facebook page. The Council has suspended committee meetings through March 31. School Committee subcommittee meetings have been postponed through March 31.

The City is committed to keeping all residents informed of the latest news. Follow the City's social media pages, including Mayor Jon Mitchell's and the City of New Bedford's Facebook pages, tune in to New Bedford Cable Access on Channel 18, and visit the City website at www.newbedford-ma.gov for regularly updated news.

"The restrictions announced today are necessary and appropriate measures to stem the spread of the Coronavirus in Greater New Bedford," said Mayor Jon Mitchell. "I am committed to providing the same responsive city government our residents expect and deserve, but I ask for their understanding and cooperation as city government begins to rely more on remote

communication. Likewise, I again strongly urge everyone in our city and region to limit unnecessary person-to-person interaction and observe strict personal hygiene.”

City of New Bedford – Department Phone Numbers

Assessor: 508-979-1440

Cemetery: 508-979-1550

City Clerk: 508-979-1450

Council on Aging: 508-991-6250

Election Commission: 508-979-1420

Fire (non-emergency): 508-991-6124

Health: 508-991-6199

Inspectional Services: 508-979-1540

Police (non-emergency): 508-991-6300

Traffic: 508-979-1766

Trash: 508-979-1520

Treasurer: 508-979-1430