

Baker Warns: Thanksgiving celebrations carry huge COVID-19 risks

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

Holidays will need to look different this year, state officials said as they recommended Thanksgiving celebrations be held virtually or limited to one household to minimize COVID-19 transmission risks.

“The science on this one’s pretty clear – gathering in groups indoors for an extended period of time with family and friends is likely the worst possible scenario for spreading the virus,” Gov. Charlie Baker said during an afternoon press conference.

Pointing to rising COVID-19 case numbers among Massachusetts residents under age 30, Baker again said people should stop hosting parties and other large social gatherings. He urged younger people, who may not experience severe symptoms of the respiratory disease, to think about the relatives they might infect, the health care workers gearing up for a second surge, and the children whose ability to attend in-person school hinges on the rate of virus spread.

Baker said his own Thanksgiving celebration this year will be “immediate family, and that’s it,” and said all families should “think long and hard about the well-being of your loved ones before you make your plans.”

For many, a household-only Thanksgiving would represent a smaller get-together than the state’s indoor gathering limit of 25 people or the 10 people allowed to be seated together at a restaurant.

If people do mark the holiday with friends and family outside their household, Baker said, they should limit guests as much as possible, keeping it “to your limited social network, those that you’ve seen on a pretty regular basis.”

Sudders said people should wear masks while together and as they prepare meals, plate each person’s food rather than serving family-style, spend time outside and open doors and windows for ventilation when indoors, and get tested for COVID-19. She said the state is working with testing sites to increase their hours before Thanksgiving.

“There’s just no way around it,” she said. “The holidays need to look and feel very different this year.”

The Department of Public Health suggests keeping visits short and dropping off meals made from traditional family recipes for relatives or neighbors. For those who do plan to celebrate with people they do not live with, the DPH says they should avoid hugging, shaking hands, singing, dancing, shouting or sharing food, and should not gather in-person with older adults, people with certain medical conditions or others at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

The department’s holiday recommendations also include seating people with plenty of space instead of at one large table, minimizing contact with others and trips outside the home for 14 days before and after the celebration, and encouraging guests to bring food and drinks for themselves and their household only.

“If people let their guard down, and they don’t do their part, all that preparation and all that sacrifice that we’ve made to bring our numbers down won’t be sustained,” Baker said. “We can all do our part to stop the spread. It’s the simple things that we have to repeat over and over that are the best weapon we have to slow the spread of COVID. Wherever you are, whoever you’re with, you should wear a face covering, social distance,

practice good hygiene. Stay home if you're sick. Get a test if you think you've been exposed, and don't host or attend gatherings with people who aren't part of your core network."

Baker, who reiterated his call for people to avoid indoor Halloween parties this weekend, said contact tracing indicates that more than half of new cases are attributed to social gatherings and household transmission.

"As we head into this holiday season, as we move indoors, as our cases, as we said almost three weeks ago, have continued to climb, use your head and think about how your actions will affect those around you," he said.

More than 1,000 new COVID-19 cases were logged in Massachusetts each day from Saturday through Tuesday, numbers not previously seen here since May, when the virus trend was on a downward swing from a mid-April surge.

Baker said there has been a "significant increase" in the number of people under age 30 who are testing positive. In April, he said, the under 30 age range represented 15 percent of the COVID-19 caseload, with people over 60 accounting for 42 percent. Now, the under 30 group represents 27 percent of cases, and the over 60 group 18 percent.

"There is a little good news in there," Baker said. "It means that our most vulnerable residents have seen a significant decrease in their share of new cases, which has much to do with many of the measures that we put in place over the spring and summer."

Recent data shows about 300 people per day who are under age 30 testing positive, Baker said.

"We get the fact that for many young people, they have mild symptoms or in some cases no symptoms at all," the governor said. "But their contact, especially close, informal contact indoors over an extended period of time, like watching a

football game on a weekend with older people, or those who have other medical conditions, can create terrible circumstances for many of our most vulnerable.”

Massachusetts officials sustain pressure on districts to have kids in classrooms

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

Gov. Charlie Baker and his top education advisors urged schools Tuesday not to overreact to the rise in COVID-19 cases this fall, telling even those districts in communities deemed to be at the highest risk for transmission of the virus to stick with in-person learning unless there is evidence of spread within the school system.

Education Secretary Jim Peyser and Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeff Riley also defended plans for the state to administer the MCAS exam in the spring, describing the test as being linked to federal funding and necessary to measure how far students may have fallen behind.

The recommendations from Baker and his senior education team came after three straight days of the state reporting more than 1,000 new cases of COVID-19, a mark not seen since May. The administration, however, continued to assert that schools have not been linked to increased transmission.

“We are not seeing the spread take place, the clustering take place, in the schools as was initially feared,” Riley said.

Last week, education officials reported 202 cases of COVID-19 detected in schools.

Boston last week switched to full remote learning, and after three weeks in the high-risk category Abington Public Schools said Monday it would shift to remote-only learning until at least Nov. 12. In Milton, the high school will pivot to fully-remote learning starting Tuesday after the rise in infections left it understaffed.

Baker said he wouldn't "Monday morning quarterback" any district's decision, but suggested school might be a safer place for teenagers than at home.

"It's a jump ball in my mind about whether having all those kids at home fraternizing with their friends, not wearing a mask, not socially distancing on the off-hours, is probably every bit as risky, maybe more so based on what's going on in the parochial schools, than those kids being at schools, wearing a mask and having the rhythm and the structure that comes with spending six or seven hours a day in a formal setting where everybody's got a face covering on," Baker said.

The governor said he understood, for instance, why Marblehead went remote for two weeks after it could not identify all the attendees of a large party. He then pointed out the decision his hometown of Swampscott made to switch to a hybrid model after being in the high-risk red category for multiple weeks.

"If you don't have any transmission in your schools, it's probably fine to continue to have kids go to school," the governor said.

Peyser and Riley testified before the Joint Committee on Education on Tuesday as part of a legislative oversight hearing on the state's return to school in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The governor's comments were made later in the day during a press conference where he backed up the message from his advisors.

The Baker administration has asked districts to review at least three weeks of community COVID-19 data before considering changes to their learning models, but Peyser said even consistently “red” communities should not switch to remote learning unless the virus is spreading in schools.

“It is increasingly clear that schools are not a source of transmission,” Peyser said.

Billerica School Superintendent Tim Piwovar said that in his town, where they adopted a hybrid learning model, there have been 15 cases of COVID-19 in the school community. While he said Billerica will likely soon be in the “red” category, the schools have detected no evidence of transmission and only five close contacts within the classroom setting.

Piwovar said the biggest impediments in Billerica to bringing all students back to the classroom was physical space to accommodate six feet of distancing and transportation.

“We simply do not have the financial wherewithal to double our transportation costs to facilitate a full in-person return,” Piwovar said.

Riley said DESE was reviewing whether it could safely loosen the guidelines for school transportation and distancing on buses, particularly for rural school districts where students must travel longer distances to get to schools.

“That is still in development and no decision has been made on that and it has to be blessed by medical professionals,” Riley said.

Sen. Jason Lewis, the co-chair of the committee, acknowledged competing desires among educators, advocates and parents for the state to either provide clearer guidance on how schools should act, or to leave those decisions more fully to local communities.

"There are no easy answers," Lewis said. "What I'm sure we can all agree upon is we must do everything we can to support the academic and social-emotional needs of all our students."

Piowar said that while he could support an MCAS exam this spring to be used as a diagnostic tool, he said it should be "loudly, clearly and repeatedly" stated that the test will not be used to hold teachers accountable or to compare districts.

Massachusetts Association of School Committees Executive Director Glenn Koocher also said he was leery of how the test data might be used. And while he credited Riley with trying to heal the relationship between DESE and local school officials, he said a "detente" is probably the best that could be achieved.

"To those who will threaten districts, I would simply say, when you threaten us, you demonize yourself," Koocher said, taking issue with DESE's plans to audit districts that remain remote despite low virus activity.

Peyser said the MCAS would be important this school year for the state to understand how much learning students lost by being home for many months, or trying to learn remotely. While he predicted an increase in pressure to suspend the exam for another year, he called that a "stalking horse" for ending standardized testing completely.

Riley said the department also has no reason to believe that the federal government will relax testing requirements in 2021, which is linked to substantial amounts of federal education aid.

"We do need, at a bare minimum, diagnostic statewide data and I think parents want to know if their kids have lost ground and how much," Riley said.

The hearing took place at the same time Baker and Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders were warning that

celebrations of Thanksgiving with extended family this year would be extremely risky.

Sen. Julian Cyr, of Truro, asked, through the chairman of the committee, whether districts or the state should consider a mandatory week of remote learning after the holiday to mitigate the threat of students bringing COVID-19 into the schools from holiday travel or festivities.

Peyser responded that the state was focused on maximizing safe time in the classroom, and Riley said that although it had been discussed, it was not the department's recommendation.

"We think, at this time, that is not the way to go," Riley said.

The emphasis on making sure as many students are able to return to the classroom as possible comes as the Trump administration is preparing to send more than 2 million rapid COVID-19 antigen tests to Massachusetts that will be deployed to an initial group of schools in early November.

Riley said the pilot program using Abbott BinaxNOW tests, which can diagnose coronavirus infection in as little as 15 minutes, will be a critical new tool for schools to identify infection in symptomatic students and staff and contain the virus before it starts spreading.

Riley hinted that in the coming weeks the administration also would have a major announcement to make on internet connectivity and hotspots for students.

Hadley School Superintendent Anne McKenzie said internet connectivity continues to be an issue in western Massachusetts, where even some principals didn't have home internet at the start of the pandemic.

"This issue of connectivity in western Massachusetts cannot be overstated," McKenzie said.

Thomas Scott, the executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, said one of his biggest concerns was burnout of administrators and teachers, which was repeated by a number of administrators about the pressure and long hours teachers are dealing with.

“We’re still learning as we go but it’s clear to us we have to be cognizant of the demands we’re making on people right now,” Scott said.

Massachusetts election officials increase security after ballot drop box fire

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

Boston and federal authorities are investigating after a fire was set in a ballot drop box in Copley Square early Sunday morning, and Secretary of State William Galvin has directed all local election officials to boost security around ballot boxes.

A directive Galvin issued to local election officials Sunday encourages them to monitor early-voting drop boxes with video surveillance, close or relocate the boxes in the late evening to prevent overnight tampering, relocate boxes to entryways or lobbies of city or town halls, and increase the frequency of ballot collections, with a “clear chain of custody” for ballots retrieved from the boxes.

For drop boxes located in areas not otherwise under

surveillance, the directive “strongly encourages” that a security detail “guard the drop box when it cannot be monitored by election officials or other municipal officers.”

The Boston Police Department said officers were called to a scene outside the Boston Public Library on Boylston Street around 4 a.m. Sunday where firefighters were “tending to smoke coming from an early voting ballot box.” Crews extinguished the fire by filling the drop box with water.

Photos released by the police department show a man at the box, and the police department is asking the public’s help in identifying him as part of an arson investigation. Anyone with information can contact the Boston Fire Department Fire Investigation Unit at (617) 343-3324 or the anonymous CrimeStoppers Tip Line at 1 (800) 494-TIPS.

According to Galvin’s office, the Boston Elections Department had last emptied the box at 2:29 p.m. Saturday, and 122 ballots were inside when it was emptied Sunday morning after the fire. Eighty-seven were legible enough to be processed. The city’s election department asked that anyone who dropped their ballot off outside the library between 2:30 p.m. Saturday and 4 a.m. Sunday to call (617) 635-2211 to check the status of their ballot, which can also be done at www.trackmyballotma.com.

City election officials will mail new ballots to the 35 affected voters, Galvin said, and original ballots “will be hand-counted to the extent possible” for affected voters who do not submit new ballots.

Galvin reported the incident to U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling’s office and asked that the FBI investigate the apparent “deliberate attack,” according to the secretary’s office.

“What happened in the early hours of this morning to the ballot drop box in Copley Square is a disgrace to democracy, a disrespect to the voters fulfilling their civic duty, and a

crime,” Galvin and Boston Mayor Martin Walsh said in a joint statement, which also asked voters “not to be intimidated by this bad act, and remain committed to making their voices heard in this and every election.”

Lelling and FBI special agent in charge Joseph Bonavolonta said in a joint statement that federal officials are investigating “the attempted ballot box arson,” and that it would be a top priority of their offices over the next several weeks “to help maintain the integrity of the election process in Massachusetts by aggressively enforcing federal election laws.”

“Voters in Massachusetts can feel confident in the success of the information sharing protocols that we have established with our local, state and federal election security partners in advance of the 2020 election,” they said. “We remain fully committed to working with these partners to protect our communities as Americans exercise their right to vote. Help from the public is also vital to our effort. We encourage members of the public to remain vigilant and immediately report any suspicious, election-related activity to us.”

Arrest Made

A 39-year-old Boston resident is expected to be arraigned in municipal court on a charge of willful and malicious burning in connection with a Sunday morning ballot box fire, police said. The fire, set in a ballot drop box outside the main branch of the Boston Public Library, prompted Secretary of State William Galvin, the state’s elections overseer, to direct local officials to announced Monday that members of the fire investigation unit had identified Worldy Armand as a suspect.

Shortly before 11 p.m. on Sunday, officers assigned to a drug control unit saw a man, Armand, who matched the fire suspect’s description while they were patrolling the Copley Square area,

according to the police department. Police said they determined he had an active warrant out of Ipswich District Court for receiving stolen property and took him into custody.

Of the 122 ballots that were removed from the box after the fire, 87 were still legible enough to be processed, according to Galvin's office, and the Boston Elections Department plans to mail new ballots to the other 35 voters.

77 Massachusetts towns now in 'Highest Risk' for COVID-19 category

Colin A. Young

State House News Service

Almost one quarter of the cities or towns in Massachusetts are now designated by the state as being at the highest-risk for COVID-19 transmission.

In its weekly update on municipality-specific coronavirus activity, the Department of Public Health said 22 new towns – Ashland, Avon, Boxford, Chicopee, Clinton, Gloucester, Lynnfield, Mattapoisett, Middleborough, Millville, Monson, Norwood, Raynham, Rochester, Scituate, Seekonk, Somerset, Swampscott, West Bridgewater, Westfield, Westport, and Wrentham – have been color-coded red this week, signifying that the average daily incidence rate is more than eight cases per 100,000 residents there, while nine communities – Amherst, Auburn, Dartmouth, East Bridgewater, Holbrook, Littleton, Nantucket, Southborough, and Sunderland – upgraded from the highest-risk category into the moderate risk category.

The 77 communities that are color-coded red and where the risk of COVID-19 transmission is highest are: Abington, Acushnet, Ashland, Attleboro, Avon, Berkley, Boston, Boxford, Brockton, Buckland, Canton, Chelmsford, Chelsea, Chicopee, Clinton, East Longmeadow, Everett, Fairhaven, Fall River, Framingham, Gloucester, Hanover, Hanson, Haverhill, Hingham, Holliston, Holyoke, Hudson, Kingston, Lawrence, Leicester, Lowell, Lynn, Lynnfield, Malden, Marlborough, Marshfield, Mattapoisett, Methuen, Middleborough, Middleton, Milford, Millville, Milton, Monson, New Bedford, North Andover, Norwood, Oxford, Pembroke, Plymouth, Randolph, Raynham, Revere, Rochester, Rockland, Saugus, Scituate, Seekonk, Shrewsbury, Somerset, Somerville, Springfield, Swampscott, Tyngsborough, Wakefield, Waltham, Webster, West Bridgewater, West Newbury, Westfield, Westport, Weymouth, Winthrop, Woburn, Worcester, and Wrentham.

The statewide average daily case rate over the past 14 days climbed to 9.2 cases per 100,000 residents in the weekly update published Thursday, up from an average of 8.7 cases per 100,000 residents a week ago.

New Bedford announces 100 acres Advanced Manufacturing Campus at Whaling City Golf Course

Mayor Jon Mitchell, Senator Mark Montigny, Representative Christopher Markey, other members of the New Bedford legislative delegation, and City Councillors joined together today to announce a plan for an Advanced Manufacturing Campus

(AMC) on 100 acres of the 275-acre Whaling City Golf Course on Hathaway Road. The AMC has been expressly developed with a view toward the needs of the state's and region's leading industries, and will incorporate the amenities, landscape and building design, and other features seen in high-quality business parks.

Building on a business park concept first introduced in 2017, the AMC refines the City's development approach, incorporating fresh information from real estate and golf industry professionals, conservation organizations, and state economic development experts. In addition, studies commissioned by the City and its state partners have now confirmed several earlier, preliminary assessments.

Among the findings announced today, the Advanced Manufacturing Campus would:

- Capitalize on high demand among major commercial real estate interests as the pandemic accelerates a pre-existing trend which saw focus shifting to large, highway accessible, "greenfield" sites in eastern Massachusetts outside the I-95 and I-495 corridors.
- Create 1 million square feet of new industrial/office space assessed at \$80 million
- Generate \$2.7 million in annual property tax revenue
- Produce more than 1,000 new jobs

Mayor Jon Mitchell said, "Constructing a new business park from scratch is no small undertaking and a complex challenge for any city, but if we are serious in New Bedford about reducing the property tax burden, regenerating our local economy, and keeping local government financial stable, we have no choice but to find a way to succeed. And with our existing business park at full capacity, it is critical to

have a new driver of commercial growth. The plan we are announcing today will create that driver.

“Several years of study, planning, and revision have brought us to this day. The plan is significantly better for those efforts. It is more pragmatic, achieves more of our goals, and is more responsive to the community. Most important, the project is grounded in a robust body of research that gives us confidence in our approach.

Mitchell added, “Of course, none of this would have been possible without the continued support of our local legislative delegation, our City Council, the New Bedford Economic Development Council, Lauren Liss and her team at MassDevelopment, and Secretary Kennealy and the Baker-Polito Administration. For all their efforts I am grateful.”

“Redeveloping the municipal golf course into a 21st century business park will spur local job creation and provide strong environmental stewardship,” said Senator Mark Montigny, who has led legislative efforts to secure state funding on numerous economic development projects in the city including the Star Store CVPA campus, Route 18 redevelopment, and the ongoing State Pier revitalization.

Montigny added, “Additional tax revenues generated by this project will also provide some relief to hardworking taxpayers across the city. Overall, the addition of advanced manufacturing operations alongside a new golf course will enhance the quality of life in New Bedford. I look forward to continuing our efforts with MassDevelopment and Mayor Mitchell to make sure this property is transformed into an economic engine for our community.”

Representative Christopher Markey, in whose district the AMC will be located, summarized his view of the project: “I am happy that the City of New Bedford will be able to expand its tax base. This project has the potential to assist in long-

term economic growth in our community. It will help fund schools and the future of our city. This project, along with South Coast Rail will have the greatest impact on economic growth for our region for the next several decades. I'm glad the state and city are working so well together for this project to take place."

City Council President Joseph Lopes said, "We must continue to do everything we can to create jobs and expand the tax base in New Bedford by encouraging new commercial development, and the business park campus and golf course is a major step toward that goal."

Rick Kidder, the Co-CEO of One Southcoast Chamber highlighted the project's positive impact on City's tax base, saying, "One SouthCoast Chamber believes that we must continue to look for creative and bold ways to expand the commercial tax base in New Bedford and the region. This proposed new development for a portion of the golf course by the City will go a long way growing the tax base and will help mitigate the burden on existing New Bedford businesses while creating significant new job opportunities just when we will be ready to fully emerge out of the COVID-19 crisis."

Anthony Sapienza, the President of the New Bedford Economic Development Council, noted the project's contribution across many areas, saying, "At the NBEDC our mission is to take all steps to cultivate and promote an environment for private sector investment that benefits the citizens of New Bedford. The redevelopment of 100 acres at the golf course into an advanced manufacturing campus will do just that."

Sapienza added, "The City's thoughtful proposal provides the stage for new commercial investment, vast job growth, improved golfing amenities, and a safer Hathaway Road. We look forward to working with all parties in bringing this proposal into reality as proof that New Bedford can do big thing to regenerate its economic future."

Collaboration with Conservation Community Leads To “Article 97” Solution

Today’s announcement also included news that a solution had been developed to resolve an important legal hurdle related to the business park project. When protected recreational land is repurposed for development, municipalities are required by the Commonwealth to enact special legislation which lifts the development prohibition and places into protection comparable land elsewhere.

A 2017 decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, *Smith v. City of Westfield*, expanded the definition of lands classified as protected by Article 97 of the Massachusetts Constitution. The City was consequently required to place into protection new land equal to the entire 100 acres proposed for the business park, a figure well beyond the City’s initial estimate of 25 acres.

After consultation with local conservation organizations and officials, including the Buzzards Bay Coalition, the Town of Dartmouth, and the Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust (DNRT), the City determined that the only viable strategy for compliance with the state requirement was to partner with the DNRT to place a conservation restriction on 156 acres of a 224-acre property owned by the City on Woodcock Road in Dartmouth.

In January, the City and DNRT entered into a memorandum of understanding for this purpose; the associated special legislation has been prepared for filing by Mayor Mitchell with the New Bedford City Council. Council approval will allow the bill’s legislative supporters, led by Senator Montigny and Representative Christopher Markey, to then work to secure its anticipated passage in early 2021, clearing the way for continued advancement of the AMC.

“DNRT is very pleased to work with the City of New Bedford to

protect this large block of intact woodland, including mature oak-pine uplands and lush forested wetland. Moreover, it fills a one-mile gap to create a nearly unbroken 7-mile corridor of protected land stretching from Buzzards Bay to UMass-Dartmouth. This project will benefit the entire region by helping to protect our air and water quality, preserve our native biodiversity, and mitigate the effects of climate change,” said Dexter Mead, DNRT Executive Director.

Golf Future Brightens

The 2017 business park concept reduced the number of operable golf course holes from 18 to 9 based on preliminary engineering reports. Subsequent surveys led to an adjustment of the business park borders and reduction in size, which has allowed for reconsideration of several golf course options.

Under the proposal announced today, the City would leave open the option of an 18-hole course, an option for a 9-hole course, and an option for 9+ “flex solutions” that create opportunities for a course operator to change active holes for various purposes or events. Under all options, a new clubhouse and parking area (comparable to existing facilities) will be constructed, and additional enhancements will be considered, including a driving range and practice areas. The course option and amenities ultimately selected will be based on continued stakeholder input and a further assessment of market trends.

Peter Boswell, Chairman of the New Bedford Park Board, said, “Success for me is a plan that brings fresh interest to New Bedford’s golf scene and preserves the course as unique asset for generations to come, and I think we have that in the approach being presented today.”

Boswell added, “I also want to recognize the good working relationship that our current course operator has with the City and their commitment to collaborating with the City

through any transition period and beyond, so that the course continues to be operated seamlessly in a high quality fashion.”

Former Director of Constituent Services for a Boston City Councilor sentenced to prison for distributing of fentanyl

A former employee of the City of Boston was sentenced today to eight months in federal prison for distributing cocaine and fentanyl.

Gary “Jamal” Webster, 36, was sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge Allison D. Burroughs to eight months in prison and two years of supervised release. The government sought a sentence of 30 months of incarceration.

In November 2019, Webster pleaded guilty to four counts of distributing and possessing with intent to distribute cocaine, one count of distributing and possessing with intent to distribute more than 40 grams of fentanyl and one count of conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute cocaine and fentanyl.

In September and October 2016, a cooperating witness made four controlled purchases of cocaine and one purchase of fentanyl from Webster, who was then the Director of Constituent Services for a Boston City Councilor. He was a project manager

for the Boston Planning and Development Agency at the time of his arrest. In total, Webster sold over 300 grams (two-thirds of one pound) of cocaine and 49 grams of fentanyl to a cooperating witness during the two-month period.

This case was part of Operation Landshark, a federal investigation that targeted impact players and repeat offenders in Brockton and Boston, many of whom had prior convictions for acts of violence, firearm offenses and/or drug trafficking.

United States Attorney Andrew E. Lelling; Joseph R. Bonavolonta, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Field Division; Colonel Christopher Mason, Superintendent of the Massachusetts State Police; Plymouth County District Attorney Timothy J. Cruz; Suffolk County District Attorney Rachel Rollins; Boston Police Commissioner William Gross; and Brockton Police Chief Emanuel Gomes made the announcement today. The investigation was conducted by the FBI's North Shore Gang Task Force and Southeastern Massachusetts Gang Task Force. Valuable assistance was provided by the Suffolk County Sheriff's Office; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Boston Field Division; Plymouth and Essex County Sheriff's Offices; Massachusetts Department of Corrections; U.S. Parole Commission; U.S. Postal Inspection Services; and the U.S. Secret Service. Assistant U.S. Attorney Philip A. Mallard of Lelling's Organized Crime and Gang Unit is prosecuting the case.

Operation Landshark was part of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a program bringing together all levels of law enforcement and the communities they serve to reduce violent crime and make our neighborhoods safer for everyone. DOJ reinvigorated PSN in 2017 as part of the Department's renewed focus on targeting violent criminals, directing all U.S. Attorney's Offices to work in partnership with federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement and the local community to

develop effective, locally-based strategies to reduce violent crime.

Massachusetts puts cap on number of Marijuana delivery licenses

By Colin A. Young
State House News Service

After wading through a raft of comments from municipal leaders, established industry players, and advocates, marijuana regulators on Tuesday ironed out the final wrinkles of their plan to establish a structure for home delivery of marijuana and create new business opportunities – and rejected a proposal to delay delivery until 2023.

Home delivery of marijuana has long been allowed under the state's medical marijuana program, and advocates pushed for a delivery-only license in the recreational market, arguing that it will help level the playing field between large corporations and small businesses because the barriers to entry for delivery are typically far less burdensome than those for retail licenses.

The Cannabis Control Commission has been thinking about a delivery framework for almost three years and will launch delivery with a period of exclusivity for participants in the CCC's Social Equity Program and certified economic empowerment applicants.

“Consumers want delivery, we wanted delivery for a long time,

and equity and economic empowerment businesses are ready to be a significant part of this market,” Commissioner Shaleen Title said. She added, “We as a commission have taken it very seriously since day one ... to live up to this mandate to include disproportionately harmed people in the industry and today was another significant step towards that. I’m really looking forward to it becoming reality sometime next year.”

The CCC met Tuesday morning to consider feedback and hold a final discussion about its draft delivery policy, which would create two delivery license types: a “wholesale delivery license” that could buy products wholesale from growers and manufacturers and sell them to their own customers, and a “limited delivery license” that would allow an operator to charge a fee to make deliveries from CCC-licensed retailers and dispensaries.

As the meeting began, Chairman Steven Hoffman said there were 23 distinct topics that one or more commissioners flagged for further discussion based on public comments. “Some are going to be quite contentious,” he said.

The first issue addressed was not contentious in the least: regulators agreed to rename the planned license types “marijuana delivery operator” and “marijuana courier,” respectively. But it didn’t take long for the commission to start batting around weightier issues, like a proposal Hoffman made to prohibit any individual or entity from holding more than one delivery license, therefore limiting each delivery business to one warehouse. He said his intent was to prevent one or two organizations from dominating the delivery marketplace in Massachusetts.

“This is not to protect retailers; that is not my logic or my motivation. My motivation is to allow for multiple entities to participate and compete in the delivery market and I’m very worried that someone can get a head start, be well-capitalized and make it very difficult, if not impossible, for other

entities to get into this market,” he said. “So I actually believe what I’m proposing is actually defending and enhancing equity not limiting it.”

Hoffman’s proposal was met with pushback from commissioners who felt it would be counterproductive to create a new license type that is specifically meant to provide more business opportunities and at the same time cap the number of those licenses that any one person or business can have.

Ultimately, the CCC agreed to allow up to two delivery licenses – either two marijuana delivery operator licenses, or two marijuana delivery courier licenses or one of each – as a compromise. Existing CCC regulations already limit a person or entity to three total CCC delivery or retail licenses.

“So with just one, I think it really becomes whoever has the most central location and the biggest warehouse suddenly has a major advantage over everyone else. But if you can have two warehouses, I feel like it’s less of a zero-sum game because then there’s more of an opportunity to build your business the way you want it, based on how you set it up with the two warehouses,” Title, who was opposed to Hoffman’s initial proposal, said.

The CCC also forbid what Hoffman described as the “ice cream truck model” of delivery and made explicit that all inventory on a marijuana delivery vehicle must be associated with a specific order. The chairman said he thought that clarification was especially important if there is going to be a cap on the number of licenses (and therefore warehouses) any one business can hold.

“This might be being paranoid, but I don’t think so. A potential way around that restriction is for an entity to preload delivery vehicles, strategically position them around the state with inventory that matches their anticipated orders, and be able to respond quickly to those orders because

they had these delivery vehicles scattered around the state,” he said. The commission also agreed to study the health of the delivery marketplace after two years of operations.

After the commissioners worked through each of the 23 policy issues Hoffman highlighted at the start of the meeting, Commissioner Jennifer Flanagan made a motion to delay the implementation of non-medical home delivery until January 2023.

“It is clear that there are two lobbying entities going on here. One is trying to say that we shouldn’t have licensing, it’s going to interrupt a certain marketplace that we already have. It’s saying things like local control is not going to exist and things like that. And then we have an entity that is talking about, really, sort of just handing the keys and letting this delivery get up and running,” Flanagan, a former state senator appointed to the commission by Gov. Charlie Baker, said. “Given the ... policy discussion items that we have today and the conversation that we have had, it’s clear there’s still a lot of questions and it’s clear that there’s still a lot of uncertainty around delivery. I’ve said from the beginning that I’m uncomfortable with delivery this soon. I think we should have waited for that.”

The other three commissioners rejected Flanagan’s motion and she was the sole commissioner to vote “no” when the time came to vote on the totality of the delivery policy decisions made Tuesday. Her comments, though, ran parallel to concerns raised by 19 state lawmakers in a letter last week.

The bipartisan group of lawmakers told the CCC that they “believe that the wholesale delivery license category proposed in the draft regulations was not contemplated, nor supported, by the enabling legislation” and asked the commission to reconsider its plan to take a final vote on the regulations next week.

The CCC did not directly address the lawmakers' concerns during Tuesday's meeting, but Hoffman told reporters afterward that the commission feels comfortable that it has the authority it needs to move ahead with its delivery regulations.

"We do respectfully disagree ... We absolutely feel that we do have the authority under the statute," Hoffman said. "We certainly wouldn't have taken the action we took today without believing we have the authority."

Other lawmakers also weighed in during the comment period – like Reps. Maria Robinson and Lindsay Sabadosa, who signed onto comments related to the CCC's proposed two-driver minimum for delivery vehicles, and Rep. Mike Connolly, who wrote to support the CCC's draft delivery framework.

"The new 'wholesale' license type exclusively for social equity and economic empowerment is a major step toward fulfilling the intent of the law that we in the legislature enacted for an equitable industry," Connolly wrote to the commission. He added, "In this time of COVID-19, delivery of adult-use cannabis is particularly important, as it offers the potential for better social distancing within the retail sector, and it also offers numerous opportunities for economic empowerment in this time of economic hardship for so many."

At the start of Tuesday's meeting, Hoffman said the CCC received comments from about 80 people or organizations and picked up on the disagreements that were evident.

"They were well-reasoned, compelling arguments and, unsurprisingly, not all aligned," Hoffman said. "I want to acknowledge this is a very important issue, it's a very contentious issue, it's a very difficult issue, and certainly the public comments that we received reflected that."

The CCC released the public feedback it received and summarized comments related to the regulations, and the

documents show a stark divide – one portion of commenters generally propose tweaks to what the CCC has adopted while the other portion tends to argue that what the CCC adopted is either in conflict with state law or is the result of a rushed process that left municipalities out.

“I’m more comfortable pushing forward with delivery based upon today’s discussion because I do think we listened to a lot of the concerns that people had,” Hoffman said. He added, “We’ve been patient here, we’re not rushing into anything. We started talking about this in the fall of 2017 and in our draft regulations in the winter of 2018, we had delivery. We had a public comment period ... we got a lot of pushback and a lot of ‘learn to walk before you run’ and we listened to that and we deferred this for three years now.”

The CCC will meet again on Oct. 29 to review the actual regulatory language of the policies discussed Tuesday and to vote on the full suite of regulations.

Massachusetts will give vaccine priority to three groups

By Chris Lisinski
State House News Service

Adults over 65 will join frontline health care workers, residents with underlying medical conditions that increase their risks from COVID-19, and other essential workers as the first to qualify for COVID-19 vaccines in Massachusetts, the Baker administration said Tuesday.

During a visit to a new Suffolk Downs testing facility Tuesday, Gov. Charlie Baker outlined a rough sketch of the state's draft plan for distributing an inoculation for the highly infectious virus once it becomes available.

The plan was submitted by the administration to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week.

"The plan also outlines our messaging efforts to make sure people know, once there is a vaccine available, that it has been approved by the federal government and is safe and effective," Baker said. "We'll also make it a priority to reach out specifically to groups that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including people and communities of color."

Massachusetts can expect between 20,000 and 60,000 doses of a vaccine in the first phase of distribution, according to the plan.

Those on the other end of the age range appear to be driving the most significant chunk of new infections: over the past two weeks, young adults between 20 and 39 represented the highest positive test rate in the state.

The rising infection numbers – higher on Monday than any day since May, albeit with far more tests conducted – prompted Baker and his top deputies to renew their warnings Tuesday against large gatherings and other unregulated social events.

Asked if the uptick in cases would prompt him to scale back reopening, Baker told reporters that most of the recent growth in infections has come not from dining or other public activities, but instead from "informal events and social gatherings."

"Those are the places and spaces where, if people are asymptomatic, they will give it to somebody else, and neither of them are wearing a mask, and they're engaged in close

contact over an extended period of time,” Baker said. “That’s exactly what happens when people get together to have a house party or a backyard party or some other celebration – the kinds of stuff we used to do, once upon a time, as a matter of course almost every weekend.”

In recent weeks, the state’s COVID enforcement team has observed several private parties bringing together dozens or hundreds of people – often young – in close quarters and with spotty use of masks, according to Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders.

One event in Everett last month “attracted more than 300 people,” she said.

“Typically, these are held on private property, away from all of our eyes, without the owner’s permission,” Sudders said.

Authorities have in some cases broken up events in progress, citing the state’s ban on large gatherings, or prevented them from taking place.

Both Sudders and Revere Mayor Brian Arrigo pointed to a party that individuals allegedly attempted to organize in the city for Oct. 10. After noticing promotion of the event on social media, State Police contacted those behind the effort and warned them that going through with it would violate COVID regulations.

Arrigo said during the press conference that an individual was arrested in connection with the incident, though a State Police spokesperson told the News Service the arrest was due to an outstanding warrant “unrelated to COVID guideline violations.”

The defendant, 21-year-old Felipe Moreira Oliveria of Chelsea, was arrested on a warrant for malicious damage to a motor vehicle, Massachusetts State Police spokesperson David Procopio wrote in an email.

“We are assisting the COVID command center in identifying organizers of large-scale events that violate the state’s COVID restrictions on large gatherings,” Procopio said. “As part of that mission we recently identified and located two young adult males who were separately planning rave-type gatherings. We made contact with both men and advised them that the events they were planning were in violation of the state COVID order and instructed them to cease and desist planning and advertising those events. In the process of doing that we determined that one of the young men was the subject of an outstanding criminal warrant unrelated to COVID restrictions.”

Baker said during the press conference that those between the ages of 19 and 39 represent “where the vast majority of the increase in positive tests has been happening.”

According to weekly data published by the Department of Public Health, the 20-to-29 and 30-to-39 age groups posted the second- and third-largest increases in total cases between Sept. 2 and Oct. 14 – lagging only the 0-to-19 group.

In terms of total cases, the 0-to-19 age group saw the largest increase between Sept. 2 and Oct. 14 with 996 more cases counted in the weekly DPH report. The second-highest raw increase was for ages 20 to 29, which jumped 816, while the third-highest was for the 30-to-39 cohort, which grew 730.

Altogether, individuals between 20 and 39 represented about 37 percent of total cases in the past two weeks tracked in the DPH’s Oct. 14 report.

As infections trend upward, some local officials have increased their efforts to crack down on the kinds of activities – particularly maskless and in close quarters – that health experts warn are most likely to contribute to viral spread.

Boston Mayor Martin Walsh said last week that city departments

are planning to increase enforcement, including fines on violations of COVID-19 regulations.

Polling location change for New Bedford Ward 3 Precinct F

The New Bedford Election Commission advises residents of Ward 3 Precinct F that there will be a new polling location beginning with the general election on Tuesday, November 3, 2020. Ward 3 Precinct F voters will now vote at: Bayberry Apartments, 151 Oakdale Street.

Residents of Ward 3 Precinct F will receive an automated call from the Election Commission informing them of the change.

As usual, on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, polls will be open in the City of New Bedford from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Additional safety requirements including the use of masks/face coverings and the observance of social distancing will be in place due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Voters may cast their ballot for: President; Senator in Congress; Representative in Congress; Senator in General Court; Representatives in General Court for the Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, and Thirteenth Bristol District; County Treasurer; County Commissioner; Governor's Councillor; and Register of Probate; and on the statewide ballot questions.

Any New Bedford resident who is uncertain about their voting status, designated polling location, or who has changed their address since the last election, or any other question should contact the Election Commission office at 508-979-1420.

Massachusetts unemployment rate drops to 9.6%

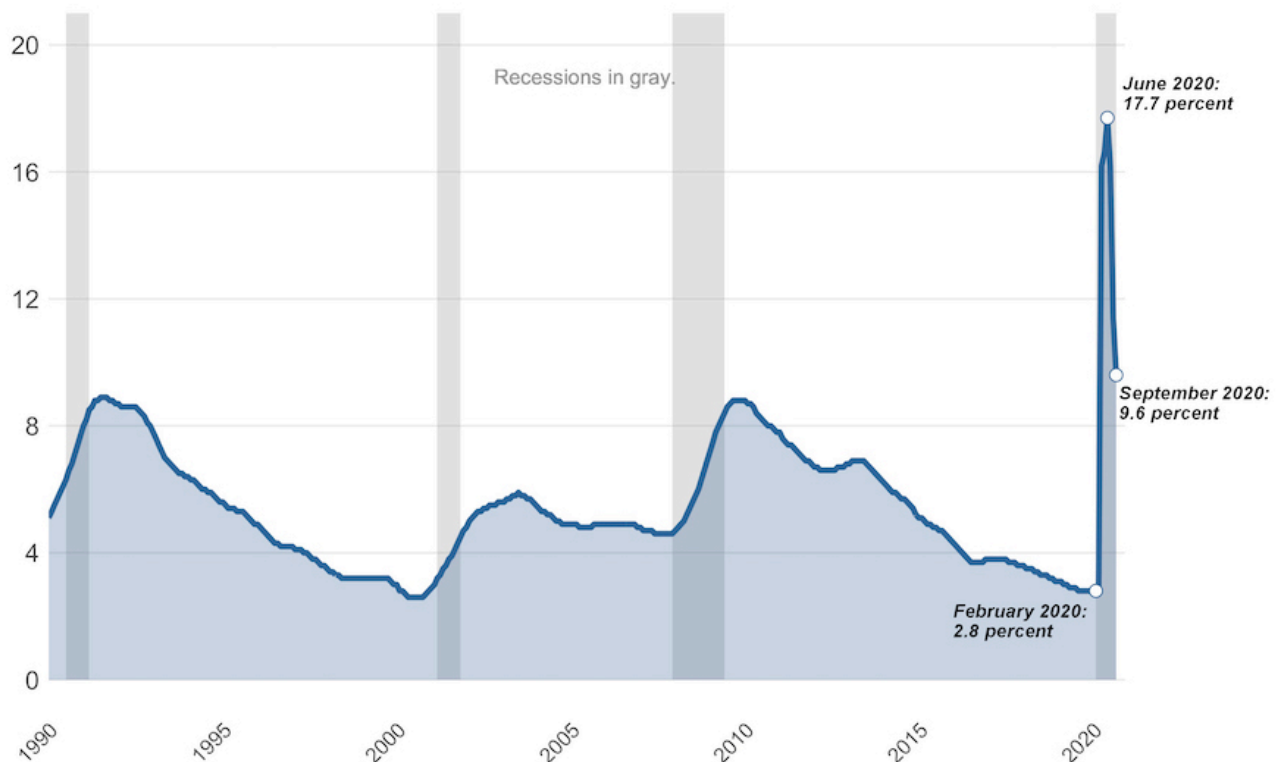
By Chris Lisinski
State House News Service

The state's unemployment rate dropped into single digits in September after spending five months above 10 percent, as employers reported adding 36,900 jobs and Massachusetts continued its economic recovery from the sudden COVID-inflicted recession.

The Massachusetts unemployment rate dropped into the single digits in September, though at 9.6 percent, it still remains higher than at any point since at least 1990.

Massachusetts unemployment rate drops below 10 percent

September rate of 9.6 percent still above previous records



Source: Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development

[Graphic: Chris Lisinski/SHNS]

State labor officials announced Friday that the unemployment rate declined to 9.6 percent in September, 1.8 percentage points below the revised August rate of 11.4 percent.

The state unemployment rate is now the lowest it has been since March, the last month of data that did not fully reflect the massive layoffs prompted by government-mandated shutdowns and large-scale shifts in consumer behavior to avoid public health risks.

The previously reported U.S. unemployment rate checked in at 7.9 percent in September.

While still substantial, the pace of job growth slowed in September with 36,900 jobs added last month, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data based on a survey of

employers, comparing to the addition of 62,500 jobs in August.

The employer survey put September's total employment in Massachusetts at about 3.34 million. While businesses have reported five straight months of increasing jobs, the roughly 320,000 positions added since April represent slightly less than half of the 690,000 lost in March and April.

The largest job gains in September came in education and health services, which added 11,100 positions, and the leisure and hospitality industry, which added 10,800. Leisure and hospitality has faced the steepest cuts of the 10 categories counted: since September 2019, the industry has lost more than a third of its jobs.

Governments in Massachusetts shed 12,300 jobs in September, according to the state's Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

Weekly unemployment claims have fluctuated in recent months after sharply spiking during the spring, but those figures also remain elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels.

In the week ending Oct. 10, 39,038 people filed claims for traditional unemployment benefits – about 10,000 more than the previous week – while another 11,478 filed claims for the expanded eligibility Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, according to the Baker administration.

Announcement of the continued overall employment gains came two days after Gov. Charlie Baker unveiled a new \$45.5 billion fiscal year 2021 budget proposal, a plan that uses reserves and federal funds to increase spending even though state tax revenues are forecast to fall about \$3.6 billion below earlier expectations.

Lawmakers could still push to scale back public services or impose additional governmental layoffs to rein in spending amid that tax shortfall, but the Baker administration believes

its plan will avoid cuts by deploying a combination of federal funds and long-term savings.

Federal negotiations about another round of stimulus that could help mitigate the economic damage remain rocky.