

**RIVEREAST****News Bulletin***Serving Amston, Andover, Cobalt, Colchester, East Hampton, Hebron, Marlborough, Middle Haddam and Portland*

Volume 44, Number 36

Published by The Glastonbury Citizen

August 7, 2020



Tropical Storm Isaias blew through Connecticut Tuesday, leaving much destruction in its wake — and, at one point, more than 700,000 residents without power. Pictured here is a downed oak tree on Fernwood Drive in East Hampton. Photo by Jeff Paragone.

Chief Warns New Bill Could Prove ‘Deadly’

by Jack Lakowsky

East Hampton Police Chief Dennis Woessner last week described the state’s new police accountability legislation — specifically the portion dealing with qualified immunity — as “deadly” to his fellow officers.

On July 31, Gov. Ned Lamont signed into law “An Act Concerning Police Accountability”. The bill had previously passed both houses in the state legislature.

At a July 28 East Hampton Town Council meeting, Woessner said the bill makes more difficult the ability to invoke qualified immunity, which shields officers from being sued over actions deemed reasonable taken during the course of their police work.

“This could cause second-guessing,” Woessner told the council. “That delay could cost the life of a [third-party] individual or officer, especially in an active situation.”

Woessner explained that, in Connecticut at least, qualified immunity never covered officers who “go rogue” and knowingly violate the law but instead protects those who had to make “split-second decisions.” Woessner added the new law will doubtless cause more lawsuits to be filed against police officers and will “tie up”

the judicial system.

Town Council Democrat Derek Johnson said in the meeting that, while preserving those split-second decisions is the theory behind qualified immunity, it is far from how it is used in practice.

“Case law with invocation of qualified immunity shows protection of wanton, intentional behavior,” said Johnson. “It’s been used to provide immunity in situations that most people would see as unreasonable.”

The accountability bill also modifies laws regarding use of force, and in particular prohibits the use of chokeholds. Woessner said chokeholds have always been forbidden in East Hampton, but that their use was not explicitly prohibited in the police department’s general orders. The new bill, he said, requires that this language be written directly into the department’s general orders.

“We never allowed that type of conduct,” said Woessner, “The [new] law requires specific language.”

The accountability bill also requires that officers intervene when they see another cop

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Tropical Storm Isaias Roars into Area

By Jack Lakowsky

Portland First Selectwoman Susan Bransfield said she called Eversource three times to report that her home had lost power during Tuesday night’s tropical storm Isaias, which caused huge damage statewide.

“Eversource’s response system failed last night,” said Bransfield, explaining she couldn’t contact anyone at Eversource.

Bransfield said the outage-alert system failing will cause inaccurate counts of houses that lost power. Bransfield posted on Facebook Wednesday afternoon that about 70% of Portland was without power.

According to information from state Sen. Norm Needleman (D-33), who represents Portland and East Hampton in the state senate, Tropical Storm Isaias left almost 750,000 Connecticut residents without power.

Bransfield said it will likely take days for Eversource to restore Portland to full power. As of Wednesday, Bransfield had yet to hear from Eversource as to when their crews will be able to start restoration and repair.

Bransfield said Eversource will need to repair or remove damaged or fallen live wires before Portland’s crews can begin to clear debris. The third step, Bransfield said, will be for Eversource to come in and restore electricity to residents.

Bransfield said she heard from Portland’s Eversource liaison that Isaias was among the worst five storms in recent decades, comparable to Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy, which both struck Connecticut in the early 2010s.

Bransfield said there have been no reports of

flooding, injuries or fires. She said several large trees have fallen onto roads and onto power lines. She said Portland’s more rural roads saw extensive treefall and blockages. Power outages are widespread, she said, but the Main Street and downtown areas have power. Portland High School was opened for residents to escape the heat and charge their devices.

In total, Bransfield said 32 roads in town were reported as blocked as of Wednesday morning. Local crews had cleared five so far. She urged residents to dial 911 if they see any downed live wires, which present significant danger.

“We’re working as hard we can,” said Bransfield. “But we need Eversource.”

Bransfield spoke highly of Portland’s Eversource liaison, saying they are “at-the-ready”, but that they are limited to what Eversource leadership says.

Eversource media relations official Mitch Gross said residents across the state must prepare for several days without power. Gross said nearly all of the 149 towns Eversource serves saw extensive damage from Isaias. Gross said he counts Isaias among the worst of the state’s storms.

Gross said Connecticut has a major “hazard” tree problem, trees that are dead or diseased and more likely to fall on homes or power lines during a storm. This magnifies the problem, he said.

Gross said that everyone should assume a downed wire is a live wire, and to call 911 if they see one. He said anyone using a generator needs to ensure it is safe distance from the

house.

Bransfield said both Eversource and Portland crews must adhere to COVID-19 prevention safety measures, like mask-wearing and social distancing, during all work.

“Personal safety is always first priority,” said Bransfield.

Gross said Eversource crews have adhered to COVID-19 prevention protocols since March.

East Hampton Town Manager David Cox said the reporting-system failure was “universal.” He said he’s been working directly with East Hampton’s Eversource liaison, rather than with the company’s emergency dispatch.

As of Wednesday morning, Cox did not have an exact number of outages in town, but estimated about half of Belltown homes were without power.

Cox said he knew of three tree-damaged houses. He said fire crews responded to several transformer fires, and power to those houses had to be cut. He said there were a few accidents, with one instance of a tree limb falling onto a moving car.

Luckily, he said, he’s heard no reports of injuries.

“Thankfully, there wasn’t much ambulance activity,” said Cox.

He said the town’s Department of Public Works identified nearly 90 areas in town where trees had fallen onto power lines. He said public works, along with local police and fire crews, are continuously patrolling town to assess damage and help where they can.

Cox said a couple of roads, mostly in the Lake Pocotopaug residential area, are totally

blocked.

“Those will be our priority areas when Eversource starts their work,” said Cox. “Everyone needs to be careful.”

Cox said he expects some areas of town will be without power for days.

Eversource’s system failure and delay come amid controversy over recent rate hikes that sparked outrage statewide. State lawmakers have put a moratorium on the hike for August, but most Connecticut Eversource customers saw higher bills in July.

In a press release, Needleman announced a call for a legislative investigation and audit into Eversource for its electrical grid hardening preparation, and its response to Isaias.

Needleman is chairman of the legislature’s Energy and Technology Committee. He is also serving his fifth term as first selectman for the Town of Essex. Needleman said 90% of Essex residents lost power.

According to Needleman, Eversource regularly seeks rate hikes from the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) to cover costs of emergency storm damage repair.

In January 2019, Needleman said Eversource sought more \$150 million in rate hikes to pay for equipment repair, fuel and payment for out-of-state subcontractors. In 2013, the utility company sought nearly half a billion dollars in rate hikes to cover the costs of Hurricane Irene and the Halloween Nor’easter of 2011, and of 2012’s Superstorm Sandy, according to Needleman.

Needleman said he, along with town crews

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using excessive force against an individual and provides penalties for officers who do not intervene.

Town Council Vice Chair Dean Markham asked Woessner if there were any excessive force cases, past or present, in Belltown.

The chief said yes, there has been one he is aware of, although it was well before his time as police chief. Woessner said he is unfamiliar with the exact complaint, but that a lawsuit was filed against the town, and that a settlement was reached in court. He told the council that, as part of the court settlement from that case, he is unable to discuss it in exact detail, but that he "disagrees with findings based on facts laid out in the police report."

Woessner went on to say that, going forward, the department plans to be more transparent about such situations.

According to United States District Court records, there is one case of the nature Woessner described: *Clark v. Town of East Hampton*. In this 2007 case, East Hampton resident Alan Clark alleged that several East Hampton officers violated his rights against excessive force and malicious arrest, and that officers failed to provide him with timely medical treatment for his injuries.

According to court documents, officers in September 2003 went to Clark's home after a report of a domestic disturbance. Clark's then-wife said Clark had guns in the house. Officers approached Clark, who became uncooperative and fled. According to the documents, officers caught up to Clark, then hit him with batons and pepper-sprayed him. Clark said officers continued to beat him after he was on the ground and handcuffed, and said officers beat him with a metal flashlight as well. Officers transported Clark to Middlesex Medical Center in Marlborough, where he received 13 staples to close a head laceration.

Clark was charged with two counts of threatening in the second degree, two counts of interfering with an officer, and disorderly conduct, according to court documents.

The Middletown Superior Court Family Services Unit ordered Clark to participate in rehabilitation and court-ordered therapy. In January 2004, Clark's charges were nullified.

After Clark sued the town, the defendants requested summary judgment from the court, which is when a court rules that no factual issues in a case remain to be tried, and that actions in a complaint can be ruled on without a full trial.

The court passed down a mixed judgment, denying the town's request for summary judgment on the allegations of excessive force and failure to provide timely medical attention, but granting that the town did allow Clark his due process of law, that officers had probable cause to pursue and arrest Clark.

On June 12, 2008, after the subsequent trial, Clark was awarded more than \$27,000 for damages, according to the *Hartford Courant*. He'd originally asked for more than \$1 million.

Jurors in 2008 ruled that Clark's rights had been violated, and that the officers' use of force was excessive. The jury decided that Clark was not a victim of assault and battery, however, so they did not award him the punitive damages he'd asked for.

East Hampton's town attorney at the time, Elliot Spector, in 2008 told the *Courant* a nondisclosure agreement was written into the settlement, barring all people involved from discussing the case.

Council member Johnson said in last week's meeting that intentional excessive use of force can be difficult to prove. He asked if a standard was tied to "gross negligence" as well. Negligence, Johnson explained, is easier to prove than intent.

Woessner said it would be "impossible to delineate every possibly disciplinary scenario." He explained that the use of force policy is to be enacted if, hypothetically, an officer hits a "compliant arrestee" with a baton.

"It's to ensure that only necessary and appropriate force is used," said Woessner.

According to the case report for *Clark*, courts use a three-pronged method to determine whether or not use of excessive force occurred: the severity of the crime at issue; whether the suspect poses an immediate threat to the officers or others and; whether the suspect is resisting arrest or attempting to evade arrest.

Woessner and the council also discussed

adjustments to the East Hampton Police Department's code of conduct.

Woessner said the bill provides new disciplinary language dealing with officers who associate with any groups identified as hateful, racist or terroristic by the FBI. Late last year, it was discovered that an East Hampton cop donated money to the Proud Boys, a far-right organization classified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group. The officer denied direct involvement with the group.

"If we ever had a situation where that came up again, I would contact the [FBI] special agent in New Haven to get [their] ruling if the organization I'm investigating is part of any hate, racist, or terrorist groups," said Woessner.

Woessner said specific penalties for any officers associating with those groups? are largely up to individual municipal police departments and are based on given situations.

Woessner said the new legislation also requires local departments to detail their situation de-escalation procedures. Woessner said de-escalation is an integral part of a police officer's training, and that now his department must create a "living document" describing their exact techniques.

Woessner said he will use caution when drafting this language. He said certain operational procedures, like how his department would respond to a school shooting, must be redacted from public documentation to protect the integrity of their procedures.

"We have to be careful publicizing our general orders because they list how we do things," said Woessner.

East Hampton Town Manager David Cox said he and his staff have been regularly monitoring the police accountability legislation.

Cox in his report to the council named the following provisions as points of interest in the new bill: requires the state's Police Officer Standards Training (POST) council to enact required training in implicit bias and crowd management; requires all police disciplinary records to be subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests; requires police officers to undergo mental health tests every five years; allows the creation of a civilian police review board within a town's government; requires the use of body and vehicle dashboard cameras for all officers and police vehicles;

prohibits state and local police from obtaining surplus military equipment; requires each municipal police department to evaluate the feasibility and impact of using social workers for the purpose of remotely responding to particular calls, or accompanying officers on certain calls where their assistance may be needed; creates an Office of the Inspector General within the Division of Criminal Justice specifically to investigate and prosecute deadly police use-of-force incidents; and requires law enforcement units to obtain accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA).

According to Cox, the anticipated cost of new state-required equipment will be about \$30,000 for body cameras, and between \$40,000 and \$50,000 for vehicle cameras. Cox estimated costs to store the equipment, and the information it records, at around \$30,000 annually.

After the meeting, Cox told the *Riverast* discussions of these grant funds are still in their initial stages.

Woessner said that, overall, the new state bill does not change much in the East Hampton department's code of conduct or general orders, and that he takes issue with only some of its content. He said that much of what is in the new bill is already practiced by most police departments in the state, including Belltown's. He added that the new bill did allow for some "housecleaning" of department policy language to make it more relevant to the present day.

After the meeting, Woessner told the *Riverast* he is not aware of any current excessive force or conduct issues between officers and any East Hampton residents. He said East Hampton's police force is always ready to assist all members of the East Hampton community.

"We all agree that the [death of] George Floyd is an atrocity, and was so far beyond the realm of good police work," Woessner told the *Riverast* in reference to the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, an event that sparked nationwide protests against police brutality.



Fallen trees not just took out power but left many area roads impassable. Pictured here is a downed tree blocking a road in East Hampton. Photo by Cassandra Cartagena.

Tropical Storm cont. from Front Page

and homeowners, cut downed trees in Essex until three in the morning on Wednesday.

Needleman said the first bill he introduced as state senator was to get Eversource to increase its number of workers. Eversource has actually cut its workforce, he said, even as their profits skyrocket.

"PURA routinely approves [rate increases] for Eversource to pay for electrical system 'hardening' so [their] infrastructure becomes

more resilient to storms," said Needleman in the release. "My question is, where has all that money gone? What did customers get for their investment? Why isn't Eversource investing in and hiring new linemen?"

Needleman said little has improved with Eversource over the past decade, "no matter how much money consumers throw at them."

On Wednesday, Gov. Ned Lamont declared a state of emergency for Connecticut.

Marlborough Residents Support Library Grant

by Karla Santos

Marlborough residents Tuesday spoke in favor of applying for a grant that could be used for handicapped-accessibility work at the Richmond Memorial Library – but Selectman Joe Asklar said he does not fully support the project because there are still too many questions about it.

The town is looking into renovating the second floor of the library with potential money from the state’s Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP).

Before the public hearing, First Selectman Greg Lowrey gave an overview of the project. He clarified that the STEAP funds would be used for accessibility work at the library – which he said would cost about \$526,000. The work would involve installing an elevator and a new exterior staircase.

Only a few residents participated in the public hearing, which was held via teleconference – but those who spoke advocated for the project.

Richard Storrs, library board president, attended the hearing but stressed he was speaking as an individual – and said the library has attempted renovations in the past, only for them to never come to fruition.

“The library board and I are very much in favor of this plan,” he said. “The second floor is not accessible to anyone who is not able to walk on their own.”

In addition, he said that a few years ago, the library was cited because someone showed up for a program, found out that it was on the second floor and that there was no accessibility.

He said having that second-floor access would be “tremendously helpful” and would allow the library to have more activities and programming.

Sarah McGuire, also a library board member but also stressing she was speaking as an individual, said she supports the town in applying for the grant to make the library’s second floor accessible. She said the second floor was part of the original library design but was never completed.

Resident Lisa Seethaler said that completing the second floor is important as there is only a small meeting room available. She said sometimes people have to stand up during meetings because there is not enough room for people.

Seethaler added that having handicapped-accessibility to the second floor is important in order to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

“It would be so nice to know that we can accommodate anyone with any physical or medical situation they have,” she said.

The maximum amount the town could receive from a STEAP grant has been reduced substantially from recent years. It’s now \$128,000 – and towns also have to front their share of the project cost before they apply.

Since the total cost of the project is about \$526,000, this means the town would need to have the balance of \$398,000 before the Aug. 14 application due date.

Lowrey proposed arriving at this amount by: using \$38,000 of the retired capital projects non-recurrent fund; make a special appropriation of up to 1% of the municipal budget, which would be \$258,000; take \$60,000 from capital reserves; and take \$42,000 from contingency funds.

After the members of the public spoke at the public hearing, the board moved on to a Board of Selectmen meeting.

During the meeting, Lowrey read a letter from Aubrey Muscaro, director of the library. In the letter, Muscaro said that the renovation of the library is a needed and long overdue project.

She said the application for the grant is a good step in helping the library become the community hub “it should be in this day and age.”

She said she supports the renovation because the library in its original state can’t grow and can’t meet the needs of the community or rise to its true potential.

“As a town and as a community, Marlborough needs to think about the needs of all of its community members including those with mobility issues,” Muscaro said in the letter.

Asklar Concerned About Meeting Space

During the meeting that followed, Lowrey made a motion seeking authorization from the Board of Selectmen to apply for and receive STEAP funds. All of the selectmen were in favor and the motion was carried.

Lowrey’s second motion, while it still passed, met with some opposition. Lowrey moved that

the selectmen recommended the Board of Finance authorize the \$398,000 in transfers. Lowrey and Selectman Amy Traversa voted in favor of the motion – but Asklar did not.

Asklar said the original intent was to add meeting space to the second floor – but said the proposal does not meet that requirement. Asklar said that after talking to the project architect he realized that the only way to have meeting space upstairs is by putting sprinklers in the building, which would add \$100,000 to the cost. He said that unless the town can meet the minimum requirements of the state building and fire codes, “we don’t have a good handle on where the money is going to end.”

Selectmen Amy Traversa said she hasn’t seen enough details on the project, but was aware that if they don’t authorize the first motion they would never get the grant. Both Traversa and Asklar agreed that the stairs and elevators that will be put in the building with the grant will be useless if second-floor sprinklers aren’t also put in.

Lowrey said completing the entire upstairs renovation with the elevator, stairs and ad-

ditional meeting space and office space costs about \$781,000. He said they are just asking for a portion of that to make the upstairs accessible. Then, the rest of the renovation could be completed in a different phase.

“I guess I’m glad the prior administrations had the courage to build the library without completing the second floor because my family has benefitted tremendously from [the programs and activities that occur] on the first floor,” Lowrey said. “I think that in the future families of Marlborough, visitors of Marlborough are going to benefit from what goes on on the first floor and the second floor.”

Lowrey said the reasons why he supports the project is the building would be ADA compliant and the complete renovation of the second floor of the library could also have 36 people taking advantage of office space.

The town has two years to spend the STEAP funds if they receive it. The Board of Finance will discuss the transfers next week during their regular meeting.

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Uncertainties Plague Portland Schools’ Reopening

by Jack Lakowsky

Portland Superintendent of Schools Charles Britton described in a livestreamed information session his administration’s effort to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic as “developing a game plan without a playbook.”

“We have to realize this isn’t going to get any easier until there’s a treatment or vaccine,” Britton said in Monday’s livestream, adding that he and the district understand the “tremendous strain” families are enduring in the ongoing pandemic.

Britton said that, no matter what developments the schools must deal with in the coming months, all policies will be “predicated on maximizing safety,” and that the schools are prepared to on short notice adjust plans to optimize safety.

Britton said Portland schools and the Portland Board of Education have yet to decide if schools will fully reopen on Sept. 1, or if schools will use a hybrid model of mixed distance and in-person learning.

Britton said if local transmission rates stay low, schools are likely to fully reopen in September, although the board of education has yet to make an official decision. Britton said the board will make its decision next week at its Aug. 11 meeting.

Britton said he received from the state Department of Education and Department of Public Health COVID-19 community transmission threshold guidelines.

Britton said a ratio of 10 cases per 100,000 residents is considered low-risk. Between 10 and 25 per 100,000 is considered moderate and more than 25 per 100,000 is considered high-risk, Britton said.

Britton said parents will receive by the end of this week a survey to gauge how they feel about a full return to school, and whether or not parents would prefer a hybrid model reopening.

Brownstone Intermediate School Principal Allison Hine joined Britton in addressing the school community. She said the schools must see survey results before further exploring safe

reopening tactics.

“We will figure this out together,” said Hine.

Hine said the key to a successful reopening will be full cooperation between schools and homes. All parents must every morning check both themselves and their children for symptoms. Britton said he himself is guilty of “taking a few Advil and powering through”, but this will not be acceptable this year.

Britton said he is expecting much more absenteeism this year. He said this is acceptable. He urged parents to keep kids home if they present even the slightest symptoms. Students who present any symptoms will be isolated in school until they can be removed from the school. Students sent home with symptoms will not be able to return to school without a doctor’s note.

“There must be consistency,” said Hine. “They must be getting the same message from all of us.”

Hine addressed a common concern of Brownstone parents – excessive heat in the school. Hine said many parents have asked her about installing air conditioning units into classrooms.

Britton said installing units into each classroom simply isn’t feasible due to the extreme electricity demand they would incur. He suggested Brownstone might start with half-days during the hot days of early September.

“We’ll watch the weather carefully, and hope for cooler temperatures,” said Britton.

Air conditioning, Britton explained, does present a COVID-19 risk in that AC units recycle the same air into a room. An open window lets fresh air be exchanged, he said.

Parent Noreen Brown asked Britton and Hine to be “mindful” of the heat at Brownstone, especially since students must wear masks throughout the day. Hine said they are still devising ways to allow mask breaks for students.

“We’re going to try and use our outdoor spaces,” said Hine.

Hine said she understands, and expects, some

families to change their minds about whether to send their kid to school. If a student starts the year with hybrid or distance learning, she said, but decides to return to school, Hine advised parents to give schools a week’s notice to compensate for the additional student.

Parents who want the inverse can do so on short notice with almost no difficulty, said Hine.

“Ideally, we won’t have much back-and-forth,” said Britton. “But we will be flexible.”

Hine said distancing students during classroom time will be difficult. Brownstone is an old school, Hine said, with small classrooms. She said teachers will be given protective face shields, rather than installing shields between desks. As is the case across the state, students must wear masks in school.

A hybrid model in Portland schools would mean half of the student population would attend school on Monday and Tuesday, then distance learn on Wednesday while schools are cleaned. The second half of students would attend in-person classes on Thursdays and Fridays.

“We’re still figuring out what to do for those at-home learning days,” said Hine.

Students will also be cohorted into locker groups, assuring that social distancing is maintained in the hallways. Students will also be assigned bathrooms.

“We learned a lot this spring,” said Hine.

Portland parent Amy Jensen expressed concern about busing. If schools fully reopen, buses will operate at full capacity. Buses will still run if schools use a hybrid model, but the number of riders will be reduced by half.

“[Parents] dropping kids off is strongly encouraged,” said Britton. “But of course, this will very much increase the number of cars.”

Britton, Portland’s school principals and security guards, along with local police, are trying to optimize a drop-off procedure for each school by studying traffic flow.

Britton addressed the current teacher shortage in Portland’s schools. A number of teachers may opt to not return to work. Staff with COVID-19 symptoms, or who are living with a symptomatic person, must stay home.

“If anyone knows anyone looking for a substitute teaching job, email me,” said Britton. “We are going to need a lot of subs next year.”

Both Britton and Hine emphasized that, no matter how much planning and forethought is put into reopening, schools may have to close anyway. Britton said teachers will be able to transition to a distance learning model within just 12 hours. To ensure this efficiency, students will be given Chromebook laptops to take home every night.

“We’re very much preparing for the event of a positive COVID case,” said Britton.

Marlborough Joins Sustainable CT to be More Eco-Friendly

by Karla Santos

The town of Marlborough has joined Sustainable CT, in a quest to become more environmentally-friendly.

Sustainable CT is an organization that runs a municipal certification program that promotes and recognizes the actions that the towns are taking or could be taking to create “more sustainable, more vibrant, more inviting communities,” said Sustainable CT’s community outreach manager, Abe Hilding-Salorio.

The Community Match Fund is one of the ways in which Sustainable CT helps towns.

According to Lynn Stoddard, executive director of Sustainable CT, the Community Match Fund provides money for community-led sustainability projects in towns. She said that if a community member has the idea of a project that provides public benefit – tree planting, a community garden, pollinator pathways or art murals – the organization would work with that individual with fundraising for the project. Then, Sustainable CT matches every dollar raised.

“We double what the community brings to a project,” Stoddard said, adding that the Community Match Fund has had “great results.”

Stoddard said that through the Community Match Fund, Sustainable CT has over 60 projects happening throughout the state.

First Selectman Greg Lowrey said the Community Match Fund is one of the things Marlborough can benefit from in being part of Sustainable CT. He said he has projects in mind that might apply to the program such as getting

an energy-efficient heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system or light-emitting diode (LED) lighting at the town hall, library, elementary school or other town buildings.

“Sustainable CT is a fabulous program that motivates municipalities, businesses and individuals to invest in practices that benefit the community,” Lowrey said.

Sustainable CT was founded in 2017 and so far 110 out of 169 towns in Connecticut have joined the organization. Forty-eight of those towns have completed the certification program.

“It’s been a lot of engagement by towns, and a lot of hard work, and a lot of great impact on their communities making them more healthy and livable,” Stoddard said.

Sustainable CT is “completely independently funded” by grants, she added. The organization is run by the Institute for Sustainable Energy at Eastern Connecticut State University.

While it is an independent organization, Sustainable CT is aligned with state government goals such as the climate goals for Connecticut in reducing greenhouse gas emissions 80% by 2050.

“We are aligned with that and wanting to do it faster and go further,” Stoddard said.

She said Sustainable CT partners with state agencies to collaborate with sustainability work.

Sustainable CT is free to join and it offers a variety of free services such as consulting and support services among other resources.

Stoddard said that equity is “a strong com-

ponent” of the programs at Sustainable CT. The organization encourages communities to become more inclusive, and part of that is offering free equity coaching to towns.

In addition, Sustainable CT recognizes and encourages sustainability through nine different categories, including: thriving local economies; well-stewarded land and natural resources; vibrant and creative cultural ecosystems; dynamic and resilient planning; clean and diverse transportation systems and choices; efficient physical infrastructure and operations; strategic and inclusive public services; healthy housing options; and inclusive and equitable community impacts.

All of those categories have actions within them. Towns must complete at least one action per category to earn the certification.

According to Hilding-Salorio, an example of an action could be to benchmark and track energy use with goals such as to reduce energy use across municipal buildings by 10%.

The certification program works with points that are accumulated through these actions. Towns document the actions they take to earn points. Twice a year, Sustainable CT offers certification cycles. In order to get certification, a certain amount of points are needed. Towns that earn enough points can be certified in bronze

or silver levels.

Stoddard said they encourage towns take these actions because they want towns to show that they are paying attention to a broad range of issues. Town certifications are for the whole Sustainable CT program. The certification lasts three years. Towns can apply for re-certification after completing the three years.

“They have to demonstrate continued action and progress,” Stoddard said.

The certification program was built with representation from every town in the state. The actions within the categories were developed after town representatives mentioned them as important to the towns.

Stoddard said that the purpose of Sustainable CT is to help inspire, support and celebrate healthy communities in Connecticut. Also, part of their goal is to support helping towns become healthy and resilient through their programming.

Stoddard said they accomplish part of purpose by showcasing what towns have done. They help celebrate and recognize what towns are doing with the certification program.

“We want in this package of things to help move towns in Connecticut towards being more inclusive and resilient and vibrant and great places where people want to live and work,” Stoddard said.

After 10+ Years, New Portland Rec Complex Opens

by Jack Lakowsky

Portland Selectman Ralph Zampano, a veteran member of Portland’s town government since 2005, said the building of the Portland Recreational Complex is one of the town’s largest-scale endeavors in recent years.

Zampano said this is likely the largest undertaking since the building of the Portland Middle School/High School complex, which was completed in 2004.

The Portland Recreational Complex opened on July 20.

Zampano was chair of the Parks and Recreation Commission when the town first bought the property. Zampano and other town officials like First Selectwoman Susan Bransfield and Selectman Jim Tripp have been working on the project for almost two decades.

“I’m one of the few people who’s been here for the whole ride,” Zampano told the *Rivereast*.

“We thought: ‘What are people in town missing?’” said Zampano of the original idea behind the park.

The project has outlasted several Parks and Rec directors. Portland’s current Parks and Recreation Director Nate Foley joined the effort at its final stages when he was hired.

Zampano said, when the project first began, the town had to work around playground-use

restriction policies that were put in place immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In 2020, officials have had to contend with the COVID-19 pandemic, which erupted right as the park was nearing its finish.

Zampano said the park’s opening is being considered a “soft” one. Visits are spotty right now due to the pandemic and the hot temperatures of late summer, he said, but he expects attendance to increase when the weather is more agreeable.

Zampano said he and other officials are in talks for a grander reopening in spring 2021, with food trucks and musical acts, provided the pandemic has quelled considerably.

Bransfield said residents can enjoy almost a mile of walking circuits, two small and two large sports fields, playgrounds, a “fabulous” adult fitness area, hills of pollinator-friendly wildflowers, and a bocce ball court. The complex’s most impressive feature, she said, is its splash pad.

Not only is the splash pad an impressive and fun feature, it was designed with sustainability in mind. Portland’s new, innovative splash pad is largely the brainchild of Tripp and Zampano.

“We looked at how much water the splash pad will generate over the course of day,” said Tripp. “Then we looked at how much water is

needed to irrigate the fields.”

Tripp said these water demands were measured and equalized. Water from the splashpad will flow into an underground holding tank. In the tank, the water is cleaned and filtered with ultraviolet (UV) light. The cleaned water flows to a second tank. The recycled water is then used to irrigate the park’s fields. He said recycling splash pad water will provide the fields with almost 90% of their water needs.

Tripp said reusing the splashpad water made sense both financially and environmentally, as the town will not have to purchase new water to irrigate the fields. Initial construction costs were higher, but this money will soon be earned back from savings on water-costs.

“It made financial sense, and it was the right thing to do,” said Tripp.

Last year, Portland was given for its town-wide sustainability efforts a bronze award by

Sustainable CT. Tripp said the splashpad is another step toward a silver award.

Bransfield said officials have many plans for the park’s future use.

Foley said most of the complex is currently open and ready for use, like the walking trails, but a few areas must still be finalized. The baseball and soccer fields were only recently seeded, he said, and grass will need to mature before they can be used. Foley said fields should be ready for use in early fall.

Operating a concession stand is also in discussion, Foley said.

Foley said this will add value to people’s tax dollars.

“It has so many different amenities centralized in one area,” said Foley. “It’s the type of place to bring your kid to soccer practice. It’s not something we’ve had [in town] before.”

Three Arrested in Andover Mural Vandalism

by Sloan Brewster

Damage to the mural at the Andover Public Library, which was hit by vandals on July 5, has been cleaned and three men have been charged in connection with the crime.

According to an update by Andover Resident State Trooper Darrell Tetreault, the men were arrested Monday.

Kevin Perez, was charged with first-degree criminal mischief and conspiracy to commit criminal mischief; Paul Friedmann, was charged with first-degree criminal mischief and conspiracy to commit criminal mischief; and Max Schletter, was charged with conspiracy to commit criminal mischief. Police did not provide ages and addresses for the three before press time Thursday.

All three were processed and released on \$5,000.00 non-surety bonds and are scheduled to appear at Rockville Superior Court on Oct. 6.

According to Tetreault, the damage was done at about 1:14 a.m. on July 5, when a silver sedan was filmed on a video surveillance camera pulling into the library. A white male, who got out of the car and walked toward the mural holding a can of spray paint, sprayed the wall, seemingly taking cues from the driver.

On the video, the vandal can be seen turning and looking to the driver “for what I would say is guidance,” Tetreault said. The driver subsequently relays “verbal remarks” to him.

After some more destruction, the vandal returned to the car and handed the paint can to another passenger, also a white male, according to the trooper, who got out of the car and further defaced the painting before they both get back into the car and it drove away.

Tetreault said police will also seek warrants for all three for vandalism that took place in Columbia on the same night.

Manchester artist Jeff Reid, who is vice president of the Manchester Art Association, cleaned the black spray paint off the mural last Saturday and Sunday, Town Administrator Eric Anderson said.

The effort involved “a lot of hand work” to clean textured concrete surfaces using brushes and mineral spirits, Anderson said.

“It was pretty successful; there’s a little bit of touchup that needs to be done but nothing major,” Anderson said. “[Reid] is a very talented artist in his own right, so we were quite happy to have him do the work for us.”

Reid, in a phone call Monday, said he used soft-bristle brushes of various sizes to get the black spray paint out of the nooks and crannies.

He likened removing the paint to a buttered

English muffin that somebody covered with jam “and you wanted to get it exactly as you had it.”

He used odorless mineral spirits to dissolve the spray paint but not the original paint and worked with lacquer thinner on some of the larger areas that were stained.

Where it was delicate, he used a rag to wipe the surface and then tackled stains with brushes.

The faces of General Jean-Baptiste-Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau and George Washington, who are part of the mural, will have to be retouched – an effort that will be completed by Hebron artist Sara Walling, who originally painted the mural last year.

“They really want to have everything back to as pristine as possible,” Reid said.

The tricky part was cleaning different surfaces, he said. The mural covers metal drain pipe, a steel door, a masonry wall and a plastic panel near the window where the sky and Andover Public Library are depicted.

“That plastic was a bit slick so the original paint didn’t stick on as well,” Reid said. “There’s a small bit [in the sky] that came off, so that’ll have to be touched up.”

By the time he got to the area of plastic where the library is shown, Reid said he had figured out a better method of cleaning over the plastic and the library is undamaged.

“It was a lot of leaning as I go to figure out what would work because they did a doozy of a job damaging it,” he said.

Reid said that on Sunday, when thunder-showers were on the way, his wife Bonnie came to drop off some water and stayed to help with the work for a couple hours. When the rain started coming down, they called it a day.

“By the time we got home, it was a bit of a deluge,” he said.

Reid said he recently rediscovered his love of drawing and painting and made himself an easel and carved out an art niche in his Manchester basement.

Reid is part of a Manchester Art Association limited palette virtual exhibition in which artists can use no more than a three-color palette. The exhibit will be viewable through August 31 at <https://www.manchesterart.org/virtual-exhibit>

Reid also posts his work on Instagram at https://instagram.com/jeff_reid_art.



Manchester artist Jeff Reid works some magic with a small bristle brush to eliminate spray paint damage on the mural at the Andover Public Library.

Storm Leaves Andover a ‘Disaster Area’

by Sloan Brewster

As of Wednesday afternoon, the town of Andover was 100% without power, according to Town Administrator Eric Anderson.

“It looks kind of like a disaster area,” he said.

He said there were no accidents or injuries, however.

“We’ve been pretty good,” he said. “We’ve been pretty lucky with that.”

Anderson said there were lots of downed trees and wires in town and 14 roads closed, with Bunker Hill Road impassible on both ends making it impossible for anyone to get in or out.

“They can’t get an ambulance to them, they can’t get a firetruck to them, so that’s a priority to address,” he said. “The first priority is just to get the emergency services in.”

Anderson said he had spoken with the town’s liaison at Eversource and learned that Andover would be getting the company a priority list of areas were in the most need of work, with the first order of business clearing roads.

Things that are emergencies, in terms of being dangerous, such as a car with power lines on top of it are the first category, and roads such as Bunker Hill, where no one can

get in or out are number 2, Anderson said.

During the Wednesday afternoon phone call, Anderson was on the way to the Public Works facility to prepare for a crew to meet an Eversource crew later in the afternoon to work together clearing wires and trees off roads.

With road clearing a priority over power restoration, Anderson said it could be a while before the lights are back on.

“Like everybody else, there’s so many people out [and] there’s just not that many resources right now,” he said.

Despite the conditions left by the storm, Anderson said the town’s farmers market still took place Wednesday.

“So you could come down and get some fresh veggies,” he said.

Andover’s farmers market takes place – rain or shine and, evidently, massive power outage – from July to November on the first Wednesday of the month between 4 and 7 p.m. at the Historic Meeting House Field at First Congregational Church on 359 Route 6, across from the Rails to Trails and the Public Library.

Parking is available on Long Hill Road at the church, or at the Veterans Memorial Field parking lot.

Storm Blacks Out Nearly All of Hebron

by Sloan Brewster

The storm that struck the state Tuesday left most of Hebron in the dark and, for some folks, it may stay that way through the weekend.

On Wednesday, Town Manager Andrew Tierney said 99% of power was out in the town.

There are more than 45 roads with trees and wires down, he said. He spoke with someone at Eversource Energy at 11:30 that morning and was told the company was still in phase 2 of opening roads.

“They’re not even starting restoration yet. They’ve got crews coming in to help from Massachusetts and New Hampshire, where they weren’t hit as bad,” Tierney said. “But remember, COVID is still hampering that operation a little bit as well.”

Once the crews get to town – assuming the Hebron Lions are amenable – Tierney said the town would offer the Hebron Fairgrounds as a staging area.

“And then once they do start their restoration, they’re going to try to do restoration on the largest amount of people they can restore first, so they’re be some stragglers well into the weekend,” Tierney said.

Roads such as Old Slocum and Hall roads were blocked by trees and residents can’t get

in or out, Tierney said, so clearing them is “clearly top priority.”

There are other roads with trees down and wires interspersed with leaves and branches, so the power company will have to come out and assure the areas are safe before local tree removal crews can clear them out, the town manager said.

Tierney said some trees had fallen on local homes as a result of the storm but there were no car accidents or injuries as far as he knew.

While the bulk of the rain associated with Tropical Storm Isias stayed to the west of Connecticut, the wind had a direct impact on the state. The result left over 615,000 – nearly half – of the state’s Eversource customers still without power late Wednesday afternoon. Combined with the nearly 100,000 United Illuminating customers in the southern part of the state that also lost power, that’s more than 700,000 that were left in the dark from Isias.

As of Thursday morning, the Eversource outage map showed Hebron remained the most impacted of the *River east* towns, at 99.85% without power. Marlborough followed at 82.39%, then Colchester at 81.58%, Andover at 62.17%, East Hampton at 54.04% and Portland at 53.10%.

Andover Selectmen Change Approach to STEAP Application

by Sloan Brewster

At a special meeting last Monday – the first in-person meeting in months – Andover’s Board of Selectmen decided to change its tack on a planned grant application.

Throughout the meeting, selectmen – some wearing masks – sat with their seats socially distant at the conference table in the Town Hall Community Room, which was largely vacant save the panel members and Economic Development Commission Chair Elaine Bucharadt, who filmed the meeting for the Community Voice Channel.

With no one in the audience to speak during public comment, Bucharadt took a moment to applaud the board for the in-person gathering.

“I’m happy to see that you guys are testing the waters here because the Zoom thing is driving everyone nuts,” she said. “This is good.”

Since the statewide shutdown to curb the spread of COVID-19, boards and commissions have been holding meetings using the Zoom application, which connects folks in remote locations over the internet via audio and video.

Last month, selectmen – after learning the state was offering a new round of grants under the Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP) – gave Town Administrator Eric Anderson the go-ahead to apply for a grant to build a new senior/community center. Last week, at Anderson’s behest, they rethought that plan, approving instead an application for a grant to complete some paving around town.

Anderson said there were two reasons to change the plan.

First, the funding in the grant has gone down

considerably, with the maximum award this time around being approximately \$128,000, with a local match.

In past years, the town has received maximum awards of \$500,000; then the high number went down to \$250,000.

Secondly, the type and scope for eligible projects has shifted.

“They’re looking for shovel-ready projects, not speculative, and whatever the original plan calls for is what they’ll fund,” Anderson said. “So we couldn’t do what we did before, which was fund the project and then kind of change, pretty considerably, the scope.”

In addition, the funding for the project must already be secured before applying for the grant.

That would mean the \$450,000 the town already has set aside for the senior center plus the \$128,000 from the grant would have to be the maximum budget for that project.

“I may be missing something here, but I do not think this is a good fit for our plans for a community center,” Anderson said. “I want a community center as much as all of you, but I think this round of STEAP funding won’t work too well for what we need.”

He said he could submit the application nonetheless but that if the town is awarded the funding and decides to move the location of the senior center from the area near Town Hall – the current location under consideration – or does not complete the project in a two to three year timeframe, it would potentially lose the money.

“I do not want to let the grant go to waste,” he said.

With that in mind, he recommended applying for the grant to fund roadwork or culvert projects and said the roads were a better fit, since the culverts were still in the planning stage.

He suggested paving Long Hill Road from Route 6 to Bear Swamp and Shoddy Mill Road from Route 6 to Wales Road.

The approximately one-mile construction project would run about \$265,000, he said, “which actually for reconstructing about a mile of road isn’t bad.”

If the grant is approved, the town would foot about \$137,000 of the project costs.

“If we don’t get the grant we just shim and overlay [the roads], which will cost us around \$145,000,” he said. “Supposedly we would know by Sept 14.”

Selectmen agreed to the changes and gave Anderson approval to move forward on the grant application.

Assistant Town Clerk Vacancy; Town Projects Wrapping Up

In other news, the town is looking for a new assistant town clerk.

Assistant Town Clerk Therese Gorry needed to devote some time to her family and couldn’t stay in the position any longer, Anderson said.

In the meantime, the last two pieces in the repairs at the transfer station are on the verge of completion, according to Anderson. The town

will be putting out a request for proposals for repaving the lot and the compacter was set to be reconnected sometime this week.

“Hopefully we’ll try that out in the next day or two,” he said Monday.

Anderson told selectmen that he has spoken about the project to three paving contractors and was given estimates in the \$65,000 or less range from two of them.

He asked for and received approval to apply for a Local Capital Improvement Program [LOCIP] grant for the \$65,000.

Before he submits the grant application, Anderson said he needs to get approval for the plan from the Capital Improvement Planning Committee, which he anticipates early this month.

In addition, a technical upgrade in Town Hall has been plugging away slowly, because it has been difficult to get contractors in due to COVID-19, Anderson said. The town should finally be making the switch from a cable modem connection to fiber optics in the next two to three weeks.

“It’s about a 50-or-so times faster connection,” Anderson said.

New servers are up and running and have been backed up, he said. The rewiring is complete.

The phone system will be upgraded once the fiberoptic connection is completed, he said.

Hebron is Back in Business

by Sloan Brewster

Hebron wants you to shop local.

Launched Aug. 1 by the Open for Business Task Force and the Economic Development Commission, the Hebron Shops Local Program is meant to bring consumers out from the pages of internet shopping – one result of the state shutdown to curb the spread of COVID-19 – and back into community businesses, according to task force chairman Peter Kasper and member Heather Petit.

Kasper, who is a member of the Board of Selectmen, said at a meeting in May that it may be time to come up with a campaign to help businesses get over the economic hurdle caused by months of being shuttered.

The task force, which has representation from local boards and commissions and business owners, was the result.

Banners popping up in town, announcing that Hebron is open for business and encouraging people to shop local are a part of the task force’s efforts, as is the Shop Local program and others in the works.

“We’ve got a lot of signage so you’ll see it at the four ways coming in,” Petit said. “You’ll see these big large banners.”

Shop Local – a rewards card program – is a way of spreading the message that local businesses are back open, Petit, who is also a member of the Hebron Board of Education, said.

Many of them have also been certified as safe by the state, she said. “It’s a little extra reassurance for customers.”

The idea, according to Kasper, is to help business owners “reconnect with local and regional customers.”

“Make the residents feel it’s safe to come back,” he said.

Buying behaviors have changed due to COVID, Kasper said in a phone call Tuesday. Some folks, for example, have given to purchasing contact lenses online. The hope is that residents will get the message that local businesses could use a boost and break that habit.

“Hey, come into Hebron Eye Care, see what we can do,” he said by way of example.

Through Shop Local, customers – who get reward cards from a participating business or at Town Hall – visit businesses where the card

gets punched or signed. Once they have five punches, they can drop the card off in the town manager’s office and are eligible for a weekly drawing.

Prizes are gift cards to local businesses.

The task force also has a website with a list of participating businesses and a Facebook page for people to visit after trips to local shops.

“The idea is that they can go to that Facebook page and talk about that business,” Kasper said.

People can even pose at local business with pets and post pictures on the Facebook page, Petit said.

Task Force member Dave Rojas and Jeff Thibodeau, co-owners of TriCounty Fitness, said the Liberty Drive gym took a hit because of COVID-19.

“First off, our business was shut down for three months, meaning we were not taking in any revenue and you can imagine the problems with that,” Thibodeau said. “We have equipment loans and rent to pay. I guess, in short, the bills started to pile up.”

By doing some much needed advertising to remind folks to do business locally, the task force is helping, he said. TriCounty’s website is even getting more hits than usual, for which he credits the task force website and Facebook page.

“It gives small business the opportunity to re-expose themselves not only to the customers we have but the new customers,” Rojas said.

The gym – a 24/7 operation – has been open, following and exceeding Centers for Disease Control guidelines, since the June start of phase 2 re-openings in the state, Thibodeau said.

It was a clean gym before, and it is more so now, with new protocols in place, the co-owners said.

“We’ve had to kind of rethink the way we do things and try to look at the glass half full versus half empty,” Rojas said. “The one thing that we have learned from it and the one thing that we’ll continue to pursue is the general hygiene.”

Next Sunday, Aug. 16, the task force will launch another program – a scavenger hunt, Petit said. With gift card prizes geared toward children, it will be a family activity.

Participants who visit a participating busi-



Hebron’s Open for Business Task Force and Economic Development Commission placed banners were announcing that Hebron is open for business around town in the hopes that folks will do some local shopping.

ness will receive one of 11 possible letters that will ultimately spell out a message. Each business will have a different letter. Once the person gets all the letters, the game is to unscramble them to be included in that week’s drawing.

There will also be clues on Facebook hinting at which shop to visit to find the next letter, Petit said. “We might say this business has the

word dream in it.”

The task force wants to engage the entire community and is also planning a September launch for a Bingo activity that is still being developed, Kasper said.

Observations & Ruminations

By Mike Thompson

We've now entered August; we're weeks away from schools reopening in the state – and I still just don't know if it's a good idea.

In other states, that are in worse shape than Connecticut, the answer to me is a more convincing 'no' – particularly in those states whose COVID-19 numbers have been really bad in recent weeks. But even in Connecticut, where our numbers are overall pretty positive, I just am unconvinced sending kids back in the classroom is in the best interests of them or the teachers.

Gov. Ned Lamont announced last week that districts can decide for themselves whether to allow 50% of students in schools in September or all of them. And while the prospect of the schools half-full is certainly better than having them all full, I'm wondering if even that is too much.

As I've been editing my reporters' stories in the past couple weeks about reopening plans in the *Rivereast* towns, I've been reading plans about facemasks (with designated "mask breaks") and physical distancing and one-way traffic in the hallways and things like that. And they're all great ideas in theory, but how practical are they? Kids will be kids. I can't see everyone being in compliance all of the time – despite what the rules say. I mean, when I was in high school writing on the bathroom wall was pretty solidly against the rules – but that didn't stop them from getting vandalized on the regular.

I still remember one of my classmates altering a painting of the school mascot – an eagle – in the cafeteria, drawing a blunt coming out of its mouth and giving it bloodshot eyes. Funny as hell? When you're a 17-year-old, absolutely. Also very much against the rules, and we all knew it. Didn't stop it from happening.

Now, the reasons why you wear a mask or social distance are a bit different from the reasons why you don't write on the bathroom wall or make the school mascot a stoner. There are legitimate health concerns at play. But what if the students don't feel they are legitimate? There are still plenty of people – I just had an argument with one the other day – who feel it's ridiculous to wear masks. Heck, there was an anti-mask rally at the state capitol last weekend. This is despite the science being clear, the guidance from health experts being clear. If a kid's parents feel that way, is he or she necessarily going to comply with school regulations? Seems dubious.

Also: one-way traffic in the hallways is a noble suggestion, but for teenagers? Please. As I've witnessed plenty of times over the last few months, grown men and women can't even be trusted to go the right way down a grocery store aisle.

Like I said, these are all noble, well-thought-out plans, but kids will be kids, and to expect them not to be so is unrealistic. They also, particularly the younger ones, tend to be, well, germ factories to begin with. Think about how quick stomach flus, or colds, spread through classrooms. It always starts with just one kid. Yes, there will be masks and social distancing – but, again, what do you do in the very real likelihood that kids ignore that?

Also, let's not forget schools are full of more than just children. I fear that, by

reopening the schools, you're not only putting students and their families in danger, but teachers and their families as well. As Andrea Ward, an Iowa schoolteacher, wrote in a recent opinion column that ran in *USA Today*, "Even if kids do get sick and die at lower rates, schools are also workplaces full of adults. Younger adults, older adults, adults who have underlying health conditions, adults who live with or care for people with underlying health conditions, adults who love working with children and want to serve their communities but don't want to give up their lives for it. Can we really ask this of them when we have a viable alternative in virtual learning?"

And virtual learning is indeed a viable alternative. Is it perfect? No. But, as Ward pointed out, in-person learning won't be perfect this year either. She wrote that "the measures we would need to take to keep students and teachers safe in our schools would eliminate most, if not all, of what makes in-person learning so great." She said collaborative group work, one-on-one conferences at a teacher's desk and more will likely be all out the window – and she's probably right.

There has been a series of letters in the *Rivereast* in the past several weeks suggesting that teachers weren't "doing their jobs" when they taught their students over Zoom or Skype or some other video conferencing program. But, I know many people who are teachers – and let me tell you, that couldn't be further from the truth. The teachers I know worked just as hard, if not harder, at crafting lesson plans for distance learning. And they missed the heck out of their kids – they wanted to be back in the classroom. But they recognized it wasn't safe, and that teaching their students over Zoom was for the greater good.

Indeed, perhaps we shouldn't call it "virtual learning." Because there's nothing virtual about it – these kids are learning, and these teachers are working.

Is it important for kids to go to school? Absolutely. I feel being around fellow kids in a healthy, structured environment does wonders for their socialization. Children absolutely should return to school in the future – when it's safe to do so. And I just don't feel it is right now. It might not be until there's a vaccine in place.

Now I know there's a very big reality I haven't talked about yet – that parents need to work, so their kids *have* to go back to school. The solution to that is easy: pay parents a monthly stipend to stay home with their children until this is all over. An expensive solution? Sure. But when you've got Republicans including billions of dollars for a new FBI building and new fighter jets in their latest "coronavirus relief" bill, don't tell me the money isn't there. It would just involve shifting priorities – and actually putting health and safety first. It's not a crazy concept.

Unfortunately, I can't see that ever happening. So, the schools will open their doors in just a few weeks. I know the superintendents and other school administrators will do the best they can to make the buildings safe, and to keep the children and teachers safe, and I can only hope it's enough.

See you next week.

