

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, August 18, 2020, Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: And good morning. Thanks for being here with us today. I want to talk for a few minutes about the impacts of the COVID pandemic on county government. We know many individuals and families and businesses are severely affected, and county government is really no different. So county government really has a number of vital functions. We're the core of the law and justice system. We have a sheriff's office that is primarily responsible for police services in areas outside of cities, what we call unincorporated areas. But we're also responsible for most of the funding for the district court and superior court systems. Counties must also run jails. And our count is also large enough to need medical examiner and medical examiner's office. We're also responsible for providing public defenders and prosecutors. We have a Department of Emergency Management to help us through floods, snowstorms, landslides, earthquakes, and pandemics. And counties are also responsible for planning and development in areas outside of city boundaries so zoning and land use issues. Counties are responsible for assessing property taxes and collecting them, which is necessary for letting us all run, for collecting those dollars not only for all, not only the county but special districts and others. Counties run our election system. And ours is responsible, also, for animal services outside of cities. Snohomish County owns and is responsible for managing Paine Field, the airport. And Snohomish County is responsible for managing solid waste and surface water in addition to maintaining and building roads outside of city boundaries. The county is responsible for running human services programs which ensure that the most vulnerable among us, seniors, those without shelter, the poor, the very young, have at least a bare minimum support system to survive. And we also have an extensive park system and help promote tourism. We have a treasurer that manages funds for all special districts in the county. So, really counties have many diverse responsibilities that span areas of critical importance to the health and wellbeing of our residents.

So as county executive, I am responsible for proposing a budget to the county council for the entirety of county services. I've got to be fair and balance all of the important functions we have. If we don't assess taxes and collect them we can't run our justice system or jail or our parks. We can't allow one area to consume all the resources or we won't be able to fulfill all of our other functions. So really an entire system needs to be supported as a system. If you cut too deeply in one area, it's going to have a significant negative consequences in another area. If you want to have a functioning justice system, you must of course support our justice agencies, but also support the assessor, treasurer, and auditor. They each have an important role to play in county government.

So this year looks to be one of the most challenging in recent memory. We have already enacted a hiring freeze, instituted furloughs, cancelled discretionary spending, delayed projects, and taken every possible cost saving measure. That's just to get us through 2020. In all, we've cut over \$25 million from the 2020 budget to get through this year. We've begun preparations for the 2021 budget and the numbers are unsettling and very similar. Our finance and budget team is anticipating a budget that may need to be cut by another \$26 million. We really do this facing the uncertainty being faced by many people and families. How long will a recession last? How deep will it be? Will Boeing and the rest of the aerospace industry we rely on continue cutbacks and perhaps operations consolidation? These are all unknowns at this point. Since the county never fully recovered from the Great Recession in 2008, we really no longer have fat. We are an extremely lean operation and we must have every single department and office do

their part. We know that the law and justice agencies are responsible for about 74% of the county's general fund budget. Three-quarters. We won't be able to balance our budget without their cooperation. We can give priority to public safety, but that just means making their cuts less than they would otherwise be. No one will be spared cuts in this budget environment. Snohomish County has been very frugal over the last 15 years and we find ourselves with no really good options. I know some will claim they are being targeted for reductions. In fact, I hear from every other elected official whether it's the assessor, the auditor, the sheriff, the prosecuting attorney, they all feel like they don't have the resources they need. Unfortunately, every single department and office will need to make reductions. Nobody's going to be spared. If we just did an across the board cut without any other actions it would mean about 300 people would lose their jobs in county government. And we're going to do everything in our power to avoid layoffs but we're going to need everybody's help, particularly from my fellow elected leaders.

So if you've been around Snohomish County long enough, you know we care about delivery of services. I don't grind any axes on politics or ideology. That just gets in the way of serving the public and it's wasted energy so we focus on service. We do much more with much less than our regional counterparts. We have fewer staff and smaller budgets. Our budget, Snohomish County's budget, is only two-thirds that of Pierce County, a similar size county. And our budget is one-sixth that of King County. King County's budget is six times larger on an annual basis than ours. They have three times more people in their county, but six times the budget. In 2016 I kicked off a continuous improvement program we call step and I'm really grateful we did because it's allowed us to find efficiencies in how we do our work. These efficiencies in operations may allow us to slow our growth and in some cases stop it, but even finding efficiencies will not be enough in the pandemic-induced budget crisis we're facing.

So I expect to deliver my proposed budget to the county council at some point this fall, in just a little over a month I believe. And I'm sure it's not going to make anybody happy. But I can assure everybody that it will be a balanced budget and we will protect our core functions. That's what our residents expect and that's what I'll do. So, I wanted to give you that background as we go into the budget season and into the fall, and with that I'll turn it over to Dr. Spitters.

Dr. Chris Spitters: OK. Thank you Executive Somers and good morning everyone. I'd like to provide you with some updates on the COVID-19 data through the current time. You'll know from our data page on the Snohomish Health District website that yesterday afternoon we shared the new snapshot and the detailed weekly report through August 8, as well as new case counts and our new two-week case rate, which the preview is that we now have two consecutive weeks of significant declines. That's good news. Seeing these slight but definite increases in overall transmission, its encouraging, makes me cautiously optimistic about where things are going, but also have to keep in mind that hospitals are also reporting a slight increase in COVID cases over the past, that's continued over the past six weeks. Not at all like the steep rise in hospitalizations we experienced in March and April, but still worth maintaining vigilance and keeping an eye on as we track the local epidemic. And paired with that is a sustained but low-level increase in individuals over 60 years of age who as you know are the folks at greatest risk for severe disease, hospitalization, and death.

I want to point out one slight adjustment to our two-week case rate. We have now incorporated updated population estimates released from the Washington State Office of Financial Management, that's who handles the population figures for the counties, and the population for

Snohomish County is now up to 831,000, a 1.4% increase from the 819,000 previously reported. Consequently, a recalculation of case rates using the new population figure leads to a corresponding 1.4% decline in previously reported case rates. This is not a substantial decrease nor it is a major contributor to the recent declines we have witnessed in case rates. For example, the figure we released yesterday was a case rate of 73.7 or roughly 75 per 100,000 with the new population estimates, 73.7 with the current estimates vs. 74.8 using the old population data. So you can see that's really not a significant difference especially when you're looking at, well, where were we two weeks ago? We were up at about 95 cases per 100,000 per two weeks, last week down to 85, now down to just under 75 so that's good news and not driven by these changes in counting of the population.

As the two-week rate has indeed dipped below that threshold of 75 per 100,000 I anticipate there will be many questions about what this means for schools. It's important to note a few things on this topic, the first being that 75 per 100,000 per two weeks is still at the top end of that middle range of what we consider medium risk for in-person learning laid out by the Safe Start framework and the Department of Health. So we're still at a fairly high transmission rate. Hopefully sustained declines over time will continue to bring that down. But we really want to see how that plays out over the next few weeks to make sure we really are seeing true and sustained decreases and that it's not a transient observation or explained by something other than a decrease in transmission. So we continue to engage in a lot of planning and preparation to support the schools that are doing the lion's share of work around planning the school year for children and families. We continue to have weekly calls with all the private and public schools in Snohomish County but recognize that they have their own operational plans on how to shift between teaching models. It's important to note that even when we do reach a threshold where a recommendation of phasing back in some level of in-person teaching may be prudent, staff and families should follow instructions from their specific school or district, as applicable. We are likely to see several shifts and adjustments as we move through the school year and I hope we can all be patient and understanding with our students' teachers and school leaders as we navigate through COVID-19 and the school year occurring simultaneously. There's no easy solution here and we're all working to make recommendations and decisions with the safety of students, staff, families, businesses and our communities at large in mind.

With that I'd like to shift to a prevention message related to face coverings. We know that wearing cloth face coverings is an effective part of the overall strategy to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to help us reopen our economy and schools. That said, the type of face covering does make a difference. For the general population, a quality cotton or cotton blend face covering that covers that nose and mouth and has multiple layers appear to work best. Last week, Duke University released a study that looked at a variety of different face coverings extending in quality form at the high end medical grade facemasks down through cloth facemasks and then including lightweight what are called neck gaiters or buffs and found that those latter items, the neck gaiters or buffs, are not as effective as face coverings. Though they're convenient, lightweight gators, especially the fleece ones, may actually increase the risk of transmission because they appear to take larger respiratory droplets coming out of the nose and mouth and split them up into smaller pieces of droplets that are able to stay afloat in the air and travel further and remain afloat for longer periods of time. So this is all formative early research, but does suggest to me that these types of face coverings, buffs and gaiters, are not recommended. Make sure you're using a good quality, multiple ply cloth face covering. Wear it continuously when around others and wear it correctly. That means fully covering both your

nose and your mouth at all times that you wear the mask. Don't pull it down below your nose. If you need a break to breathe fresh air without the face covering, go outside, get away from other people, take it off, have a break, and then put it back on correctly and then re-enter your workplace or wherever you were that requires you to have a face covering.

So with that, I'd like to turn it back over to Executive Somers.

Dave Somers: Thank you doctor. Do we have any questions this morning?

Let's see, if you look at this week's report and last week's report, it shows thousands fewer tests being reported and a reduced number of negative tests. Those changes date back to early July. It leads to a jump in positivity rate from 5 to 7.5%. Dr. Spitters, can you explain this and comment on whether it's significant.

Chris Spitters: Certainly. So in the past week, we download our testing data from the Washington State Department of Health communicable disease epidemiology platform once a week and calculate our rates. And even before this if you go back over time every week numbers from past weeks are changing sometimes as people's county has been reassigned or new results make their way in. So there's always a little bit of instability in those numbers. But you're correct, there was a large change this past week, not only in that week itself but in prior weeks as the Department of Health reframed how its counting testing from the end of last week back to the beginning. They reframed it by person. So instead of seeing total numbers of tests, you're seeing total number of people tested negative or tested positive, and so if I go in, prior to last week, if I have gone in for four tests of time I would be counted as four negative tests in the prior method of counting. In the current one that is presented, if I go in for four tests I'm just one individual counted as negative. So you can see that decreases the number of tests and the number of negatives, as you've accurately described, and that explains the difference. Now, hold onto your seats because it sounds like the Department of Health is going to undergo another change in counting at some point in the next couple of weeks that will, going forward, start focusing back on counting tests done. And we'll update you on those methods and the implications for the counts that you see as it comes along. So in summary, yes there was a change. It had to do with changing, going from counting number of tests to number of people tested, and it did decrease the total numbers and the numbers of negatives but does not change our overall assessment of what's going on with COVID-19.

Dave Somers: Dr. Spitters, you said we were likely to see several shifts and the questions says in the school year, but is anybody looking at potential negative impacts of phasing kids back and out of in-person school and impact on the education of interrupting routine?

Chris Spitters: Well by all means. Stability is a key feature at least as a former parent of school-age kids and as a health official I think stability in children's lives and families' lives is very important. Sometimes the stability is as important as what exactly is going on. Sometimes a stable sub-optimal situation might be better than moving in and out of optimal to sub-optimal over time. But that's really a school decision. We're here to inform them about the disease environment that their school is in and help guide them through that. But I know that stability or kids and for families and for the school environment is a key ingredient that school administrators are also thinking about.

Dave Somers: There's a question here about the study and we provided the link regarding the gaiters and buffs so there's a link in the chat box. Point you to that.

<https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/08/07/sciadv.abd3083>) It's a study conducted by Duke University. Any other questions?

When is the best time to get a flu shot?

Chris Spitters: Well, so influenza vaccine typically becomes available at some point in the month of September. It makes its way out from the manufacturers to the clinics and pharmacies that we all go to to get the flu shot. In general, overall population-wide, the sooner the better for two reasons. One is although our flu season usually has tended to land and kind of pick up in December, January, February, you never know when you're going to get an early season. So early is in general recommended. Sometime in September or October. The other reason to try to get it done early is to avoid a log jam as you and others who haven't gotten it done yet, we start to move into November and people then start to rush to go get one, which is a good idea if you haven't had one yet. But I think trying to space that out and give yourself some leeway. So October, early October is a great time to start. That's when most healthcare facilities do so.

Dave Somers: I've got a question for you on that one. Does the flu shot evolve or change over the course of a year? Is that shot that, I saw it's available this week now, does that stay stable through the season?

Chris Spitters: Yes it's stable through the season. Every year at the end of the flu season, sometime between April and June, there's an international group that looks at the flu viruses circulating and then picks the vaccine strains that are the best match for what's circulating around the world in April and June thinking that's likely what we'll see in the fall and winter. That's made, put into bottles, and that's stable until the next season.

Dave Somers: So a follow-up question on the school issue. A recent report on resuming schools specific to King County suggested anywhere between 5 and 42% chance of at least one positive COVID case on first day of in person school even at the lower rates of 20 per 100,000 and it also largely recommended only having K-5 kids resume in person at a hybrid model. Any ideas to how that compares to what you see here in Snohomish County?

Chris Spitters: Overall I think the findings reported by the IDM in that last report are really more or less in harmony with the state's guidance to schools that especially at the current high rates of transmission when we bring kids together in schools and staff, there are going to be cases in the building on day one. There's just too many people around for that not to be the case. I think a reasonable estimate of the, it's an estimate, but roughly one in 200 to one in 500 people in the county is actively contagious with COVID at the current time. So if you put 500 people in a building, you're going to have at least one case in that building. So there's a high probability especially as you bring people together, and that's true in Snohomish County, King County. And it will continue to be true, just less so as rates come down. But even when we get down into the lower rates, both we in public health and our partners in the school system, we need to be prepared to address cases when they occur and that's what we're planning to do and why we continue to work together. That's about all I have to say about that.

Dave Somers: And there's follow-up for me. Do you anticipate having to cut the budget for law enforcement significantly? I anticipate, in fact I know that we will not be able to hire. We have a number of vacant positions throughout county government and some of those are in law enforcement. We do not have the revenue to fill many of those positions. What we're trying to do is keep the current level of service, keep officers that are working now keep them working

into the future. We're also in preliminary estimates really trying to make sure we're covering all of the essential services there in the sheriff's department. So there will be no specific targeting at law enforcement but they will, as I mentioned earlier, be part of the entire system that we are having to respond to pretty close to a 20% budget reduction from where we were and what we would need to continue everything at the level they were before the pandemic. Any other questions?

Joint Information Center: This is Kari in the Joint Information Center. I'm not seeing any other questions at this time. We're close to 10 o'clock. I want to thank you all again for joining us today. We'll go ahead and wrap up and please do stay tuned for future media availabilities. Thank you.