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Niagara County can't let up now, or more closures could come

"We can see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"Better days are around the corner."

"We are nearing the beginning of the end."

These are just a few of the sentiments I have heard and read across multiple media outlets from all sorts of people of late. They all refer to, of course, the initial deployments of the COVID-19 vaccine. Like most of you, I'm sure, I'm ready for some good news and optimism. But my enthusiasm is tempered because of another saying that is ringing pretty true right now: things could get worse before they get better.

The number of positive cases

in Niagara County has been on the upswing since Halloween and has really begun to spike since Thanksgiving. We have had three straight weeks of close to or more than 100 positive cases per day – when we had no such days going all the way back to March. The expectation is that this trend will continue through the holiday season and will level off in mid-to-late-January – hopefully.

What's worse is that there is a linear, consistent pattern to all of this – more positive cases lead to more hospitalizations a week or so later and then more deaths after that. We have lost 20 residents over the last month, after seeing the number of deaths in Niagara County go to zero for an extended period of time. That is a lot of hurt for families across our community.

This trend was further underscored when Gov. Cuomo recently declared a significantly larger portion of Niagara County

a "yellow zone." That zone now includes all of Niagara Falls, Town of Niagara, North Tonawanda, Wheatfield, Pendleton and Lockport; significant sections of Cambria, Lewiston and Royalton; and portions of Newfane and Hartland. A "yellow zone" designation still allows schools and businesses to stay open, but does put some restrictions on indoor dining and requires some COVID testing in schools.

The bigger threat is that this puts us on a trajectory toward a "red zone," which would be a shutdown of all but essential businesses and a return to how we operated last spring. The metric used in determining a "red zone" designation is if the WNY regional data shows we are three weeks away from our hospitals reaching 90% capacity; as of this writing, we are at 75%.

We must do all we can to avoid this. Many small businesses barely

made it through the last round of closures and cannot face that again. We need the tourist season to rebound and the border reopened. We need people to be able to find jobs and get back to work. The current trend lines are working against all of this.

So, what do we need to do from now until the vaccine becomes widely available, most likely in the spring? I think everyone knows that answer. Maintain social distance, wear masks and stay home when you can. Hospitals, health departments and health care workers are already overwhelmed and are fearful of what holiday get-togethers are going to bring. Please think twice about those gatherings. Please use all due caution to protect yourself and those around you.

There is, indeed, light end at the end of tunnel, but we still have a lot to overcome to reach it.



Becky Wydysh
Chairwoman

In a very difficult year, much was still accomplished

BY IRENE MYERS
Niagara County Legislator
First District

When I took the oath of office this past January to serve in the Niagara County Legislature representing the Town of Porter and part of Lewiston, I could never have imagined what this year would hold. The COVID-19 pandemic seemingly turned our world upside down overnight.

Yet, as so many families and businesses dealing with setbacks over the course of the year discovered, the only choice we all had was to further our resolve and battle forward. For me, that meant there were still issues important to our community that needed attention, even if most of the focus was on the pandemic.

Let me walk you through a few of them.

We were on top of issues related to Lake Ontario flooding, and lawmakers at all levels of government worked in a bipartisan manner to continue to push the International

Joint Commission (IJC) to change their policies to better deal with Lake Ontario flooding. Water levels were very high back in February, but the IJC allowed more water to drain out of the lake and we avoided a repeat of 2017 and 2019. I'm happy to report that the IJC will again increase outflows in 2021. While this action is not guaranteed to prevent flooding, at least it shows the IJC is finally listening to our collective voice.

Niagara County took a very proactive stance in protecting agricultural land from industrial wind and solar projects. It's a shame that this issue often gets reported either as you are "for" or "against" green energy. The fact is, we need to embrace green energy, but the location of these facilities must be done in a way that can garner community support. A top-down approach from Albany bureaucrats that ignores the wishes of the local community is just wrong. We are going to be battling this issue throughout 2021.

I continued to stay on top of several local projects. First, is the shoreline project at Old Fort Niagara. I have been communicating with the Army Corps of Engineers to stress we must secure this shoreline as soon as possible to preserve and protect our historically significant structures and prevent further erosion. We know how important Old Fort Niagara is as a cultural and tourism landmark, and the high water levels are putting it under severe stress.

I also have expressed my concern to the Army Corps of Engineers regarding the remediation of the Niagara Falls Storage Site (NFSS) in Lewiston. There are many steps to work through in this effort, but the bottom line is that remediation remains an urgent, high priority for the community. I have heard from many residents who would like to see the entire site restored to its unrestricted use condition in 1940, just before the federal government took the property to support our nation's

World War II effort. That may or may not be feasible down the road, but we must get the remediation work done.

There are so many more issues I could write about, but I'd rather end with a hearty thank you for all the efforts by so many during this pandemic. From our frontline workers in health care facilities and nursing, to first responders and emergency personnel, thank you. To all essential workers who just did their jobs, thank you. To our school leaders, teachers and parents for finding new ways to educate our kids, thank you. To all the good citizens who checked in on that elderly neighbor, brought groceries to those who were housebound and just pitched in, thank you.

Let's hope we are on the cusp of better times ahead. I wish you and your family all my best and encourage you to do all you can to stay safe.

Carbon monoxide safety reminders

Village of Lewiston Building and Zoning Officer Ken Candella is sharing this message from the New York State Division of Consumer Protection. DCP stated:

As we gather this holiday season, NYS Division of Consumer Protection wants to help keep you safe. In light of the public health crisis and with winter approaching, families are spending more

time at home than ever. Did you know that many deaths due to carbon monoxide poisoning occur during the winter months? Learn how to stay safe this year by following the tips below, provided in partnership with the Consumer Protection Safety Commission (CPSC):

- Carbon monoxide – Known as the invisible killer, carbon mon-

oxide leaks are undetectable as they are odorless and colorless. Prevention is key, and can be done by taking the following measures:

- √ Install a battery-operated or battery-backed carbon monoxide detector. Replace batteries once a year in all CO alarms on every level of your home and outside sleeping area. Note that this is different from your smoke alarm.

- √ Have your home heating systems (including chimneys and vents) inspected and serviced annually by a trained service technician.

- √ Never use portable generators inside homes or garages, even if doors and windows are open. Use generators outside only, at least 20 feet away from your home.

SEE CARBON, continued on Page 5

Niagara County Tribune/Sentinel

Founded February 14, 1987

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©2020 Niagara Frontier Publications

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The Tribune is published weekly.

Display Ads Deadline: MONDAY 5 PM

New York State Press Association, Niagara County Builders Association, Grand Island Chamber of Commerce, Wheatfield Business Association Inc., Niagara River Region Chamber of Commerce, The Niagara USA Chamber.



NIAGARA FRONTIER PUBLICATIONS

