

Niagara County plans to 'ReStart, ReThink, ReConfigure'

Niagara County Legislature Vice Chairman John Syracuse on Thursday announced the formation of three working groups charged with preparing Niagara County for post-pandemic operations. Syracuse said the effort will involve members of the legislature as well as other county leaders, department heads and community partners.

"Niagara County and its residents are more than ready to get back to business, get back to fully functioning, but we fully recognize there is more to that than simply flipping a switch and saying go," Syracuse said. "Our efforts to date have mostly been focused on providing necessary services to taxpayers while adhering to COVID-19 restrictions. Now, we must begin pivoting to post-pandemic planning, some of which has already been underway, so we can hit the ground running."

Syracuse said this county initiative will be broken into three key working groups:

- "ReStart Niagara" is focused on helping businesses get started back up and running, accessing government programs, and providing any other support

"This effort will be done in partnership with the Niagara USA Chamber and the Center for Economic Development," said Legislator Rich Andres, who will chair the committee. "Businesses will have a lot of questions and issues regarding reopening, and, just as we have been doing throughout this crisis, we will continue to be a resource to assist them."

- "ReThink Niagara" is focused on what was learned in

providing services to the community during the pandemic that can modernize services delivery going forward

"Many of our departments had to quickly adapt to technology in order to deliver services in creative ways so we do not want to automatically default back to the old ways of doing business," said Legislator Jesse Gooch, who will co-chair the committee with Legislator Tony Nemi. "I look forward to working closely with County Clerk Jastrzemski and our department heads to seize what this opportunity to modernize our operations."

- "ReConfigure" Niagara is focused on operating Niagara County government in a time of severe budget constraints

"Like families and businesses across our community, there is no avoiding painful budget decisions caused by this pandemic," said Majority Leader Randy Bradt, who is also an accountant and will chair this committee. "Working with County Treasurer Kyle Andres, County Manager Updegrove and his budget team, we have a huge task in front of us to figure out how we balance our budget in these very challenging times."

Syracuse said he is not expecting a report from each committee, but rather proposals made as they move forward.

"This is not an academic exercise or some long-range planning effort that will be implemented down the road," he said. "We expect concrete action from each committee in real time."

Testing key component of reopening



New York state has initiated a drive-thru COVID-19 testing site at Niagara County Community College in Sanborn. (Photo by Mark Williams Jr.)

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 questions. But in other counties we've seen them run these test sites for several days in a row, most likely based on the demand that they're seeing and the number of people who are calling requesting these tests.

"So, again, if you want to be tested, please call that number, 1-888-364-3065, and talk to their operators to see if you can get yourself scheduled for that site."

Antibody Testing at Wegmans

On Tuesday, Wydysh said, "The state Department of Health ran one of their antibody testing clinics that was out at Wegmans on Military Road in Niagara Falls."

"Now, again, the antibody testing is very different. This site out of NCCC is actually doing diagnostic testing to let individuals know if they are currently infected with COVID-19. The antibody testing will show you if you've had previous contact with the virus – and that could be any time in the past really not sure how far back that could have gone. But again, that will show you if you have the antibodies in your system, meaning you had prior contact and potentially could be a donor to individuals who are currently infected and needing treatment; that's an option that that is being used, as well."

"Niagara Falls has consistently

been the area with our highest number of positive cases. So, certainly good that that antibody testing is being done in that area. It will be interesting to see how those numbers come back.

"Now again, those antibody testing sites are not something that we can let you know about ahead of time. We actually don't know ourselves. They're pop-up testings purposely, because they don't have enough tests, of course, to test everyone who would want to be, and they're only there for a few hours. It is limited and they do those kind of as a surprise pop-up, so that they don't have large numbers of people showing up ahead of time."

"Bottom line is that, after all of the frustration we've seen in testing supplies here in Niagara County, we are now making progress. So, of course, we thank the state Department of Health for coming in to run those different testing sites."

Reopening?

Wydysh said, "Testing being done is a key component in the un-'PAUSING' of New York, according to the governor. So, this is certainly a step in the right direction. We, again, need that good data to be able to make good, safe decisions for our businesses as we look at reopening in the area."

She added, "We're all thinking about reopening and what it will take to make that happen, of course; and we don't know an exact timeframe. The governor talks, again, about his regional approach to reopening, and the data that's needed to decide when an area will be able to open safely. "Businesses, of course, will need to show that they're able to follow social distancing and other safety protocols before being allowed to reopen."

"The businesses out there, I

know many of you are already thinking about this plan and how you might implement that when you're allowed to reopen – and Niagara County can certainly help in at least one area right off the bat. We will be reaching out in the coming days and weeks as those regional plans are put into place. We will certainly be working with all of our business community at the local level to help you through that process."

On Thursday, Niagara County unveiled its three-pronged "ReStart, ReThink, ReConfigure" plan. See related story.

Cloth Masks for All Niagara County Businesses

Wydysh said, "One thing that we can offer right now is the cloth masks. Last week, we offered those free cloth masks through Niagara County Department of Emergency Management to businesses who needed to give them to their essential workers. We would now like to open that up to all of our area businesses. We gave out over 15,000 masks in the last week through that program. And we now want to offer this to businesses who are starting about their reopening process, and will need them for all of their employees most likely when that occurs."

"We encourage businesses to take part in this opportunity, because we know that you can't order masks today, necessarily, and have them tomorrow. So, we're asking that you start, again, thinking ahead about those reopening plans and utilize this offer that we have for you."

"You can either email ncem@niagaracounty.com, or call 716-438-3171, to get those masks."

"We are now opening this up to all businesses who are starting to put in place their reopening plans and we'll need those masks in the future."

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