

Mayor's Transcript

This is Dr. Joe Pat Hatem, Mayor of the City of Southport.

I would like to talk to you today concerning a better way forward with respect to the COVID-19 Pandemic and how Southport is going to "Stay the Course" with respect to following Governor Cooper's Executive Order, CDC Guidelines, and always following public health recommendations that create a safe environment for all our citizens.

STEADY AS SHE GOES! To protect the health of our community, whether personal, environmental or economic health, promoting safety, preventing untoward events, is the cornerstone of how we move forward.

I want to thank our citizens, our businesses, our city employees, for their cooperation and patience. Our emergency services, fire, police and rescue, all first responders, our hospital, have all risen to the challenge of an entirely new viral illness that developed into a global pandemic that has taken the lives of over a half of a million people in the United States.

Due to a massive vaccination campaign, there has been a dramatic decline in cases and deaths, but we are now at a plateau, where cases and deaths are no longer declining and in some states, starting to increase.

This unfortunate leveling off as opposed to a continued decline is due to the lifting of public health measures, the mutation of the virus that is more transmissible and that we have not achieved herd immunity where at least 70%--80% of our population is protected against COVID-19. There also is a large cohort, young adults and children, who have not been vaccinated. So as the pandemic changes, we as a community will evolve, adapt and change.

What are the facts? SOUTHPORT IS OPEN! And has been open since Mother's Day weekend 2020. That is almost a year that our businesses and restaurants have been open, but with limitations and guidelines to help prevent the spread of a highly contagious and potentially deadly disease.

Tourists and visitors have been here, and are here. Not in the maximum numbers previously, but compared to this time last year, there is traffic in town and parking spaces are full. Southport is open for them.

What has not been open, are certain city facilities that have been closed to events and mass gatherings due to the pandemic.

The Community Building has been closed due to the restrictions under the governor's executive order and from guidelines from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services: *"50% fire capacity. Up to 50 people inside and 100 people outside or 12 people per 1000 square feet. Events limited to seated events only. Each group of guests must be seated to achieve at least 6-foot separation between each group of guests in all directions. Guests must remain at their seats except to enter, leave, visit the restroom, and obtain food or drink. Do not allow standing receptions, events or cocktail hours. Close dance floors and not allow dancing."*

Franklin Square Park and Waterfront Park have been closed to events. Under the governor's executive order, festivals, parades, and mass gatherings, are not allowed.

City Hall has been closed to the public to protect city employees and initially some of our employees were working from home. Now, all are back working in City Hall.

Our parks, pier, and playgrounds are open. Again, with public health measures that apply all over our city: wear a mask, wait- physical distancing- at least six feet, and good hand hygiene.

So how do we “Stay the Course” with respect to protecting our community while adapting and evolving with the pandemic? We do so by staying the course with the combination of mass vaccination and public health mitigation measures.

If we stay on the this course, even with a lack of further decline in cases, I have recommended the following: We will “Stay the Course” until Memorial Day, as I previously recommended and then on June 1st, under public health guidelines, we will open the City of Southport Visitors Center, the Garrison Lawn, Indian Trail Tree Meeting Hall and City Hall.

Also, under public health guidelines and with the assistance of the Department of Tourism and Communication, the city has developed a safe plan to use the Garrison Lawn at Fort Johnston to hold the Summer Market, Summer Concert Series, Plein Aire, and other city cosponsored events. Again, these will be held on the Garrison Lawn, measured out for social distancing, limitations on capacity and other public health safety measures.

This begins June 1st and it is up to the organizations to work with the city in safely planning their events.

As for the Community Building, Franklin Square Park and Waterfront Park, we will stay the course and there will be no public events held there through Labor Day. Large, mass gatherings must continue to be avoided as herd immunity will not be achieved until early fall.

After Labor Day, my plan is to open the Community Building, Franklin Square Park, and Waterfront Park to events. By this time, a majority of our city, our state, and our country should be immunized.

Will there still be public health measures and guidelines to adhere to at that time? Most likely there will be necessary measures to continue. But it is my recommendation that we open the city—pending that the science and statistics agree with my decision.

Again, we “Stay the Course” in terms of safety, but we adapt, we evolve, we find “A Better Way Forward.” I envision Southport hosting the Wooden Boat Show and Winterfest. Again working with our citizens and civic organizations to safely hold events in our city.

Again, due to the present limit on mass gatherings, the Community Building, Franklin Square Park and Waterfront Park will remain closed to events until after Labor Day. The N.C. Fourth of July Festival in Southport will be celebrated as last year—small gatherings with your family and friends. The science, the data, the public health recommendations from the CDC, the governor’s executive order, do not support mass gatherings of thousands of people at this point in the pandemic.

I appreciate the work of the Southport Oak Island Chamber of Commerce has done in moving venues, altering the festival, to accommodate these guidelines while still celebrating our great nation.

In the final analysis, we must all do our part. “Take Your Best Shot” and get vaccinated. Wear a mask, it shows respect, it shows that you care, and it protects you, your family, and your friends. Look out for each other for the pandemic is not over, but we have made great progress.

Southport is open and with respect to our businesses and restaurants, has been open. Not as in 2019, but so much better than the spring of 2020. The First Lady and I have visited many of the businesses in town. A large majority are doing well under the circumstances and have adapted. The city is marketing Southport as a great destination.

Southport is blessed. It is one of the crown jewels in our state. We have the glorious view of the Cape Fear River, a quaint village atmosphere, the historic yacht basin, a charming downtown, southern hospitality, and the greatest economic engine, tourism, as we as the greatest and most supportive community who shops and dines in Southport. We can either curse the darkness or rejoice in the light.

Southport is going to continue to recover economically and barring a massive surge in COVID-19 cases, we will continue to safely grow our economy. Southport is open and has been open.

As your Mayor, as a doctor, as a public health advocate, stay the course with me with respect to public health initiatives, as we adapt, evolve, and together find our way out of this pandemic and towards a brighter future for Southport and all its citizens.

STEADY AS SHE GOES, Southport.

Stay Well, Stay Safe, and Stay Southport Strong.