

CITY OF MOUNT VERNON  
**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Hiawatha Water Park Closed for 2020**

MOUNT VERNON - City of Mount Vernon Mayor Matt Starr announced that Hiawatha Water Park will keep its doors closed for the 2020 season. The decision came Monday morning after lengthy discussions about options for the season among city and county officials amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Governor Mike DeWine ordered indoor water parks closed on March 16th until further notice. Currently, outdoor water parks appear to fall under the order of non-essential businesses which also are to remain closed for the time-being. The decision to open, however, is contingent on future developments that impede the timing of preparation and operations for the popular city attraction.

“This has been a difficult decision,” said Mayor Starr. “But, we took a holistic approach to determining what was best for the community based on information we have now and could expect this summer. It’s not perfect information, but it did drive our business decision.”

Opening Hiawatha Water Park is more than simply filling and chlorinating the pool, it includes maintenance, repairs, personnel hiring, training, scheduling and managing. Even with a shortened season, too many potentially negative outcomes drove the City’s advisors to reach its conclusion. Among those weighing in on the discussion was Safety-Service Director Rick Dzik, who has outlined the City’s COVID-19 Response Plan.

“I recommended the Mayor close Hiawatha Water Park for the summer due to the need for aggressive social distancing even after the peak infection rate to prevent a rebound,” Dzik said. “And, it did not make sense financially or logistically to open the park even for a shortened season.”

Starr added that the maintenance projects and park improvements had to be put on hold in order to curtail unnecessary spending until the economy rebounds. The two slides were to be repainted and repaired. The repairs to the pebble flex floor surface on the north pool will proceed as it is under warranty.

Knox County Health Commissioner Julie Miller added her trepidation to the City’s water park opening because of her concern for the safety of the public. Miller also recounted from personal knowledge that one of the Ohio COVID-19 deaths occurring earlier this year was traced back to the person having attended a water park where the victim was thought to have contracted the disease.

“I’m afraid that as far as June or possibly into July could be a time too soon to let down our guard,” said Miller. “I know the summertime is when everyone wants to get outside and play in the sun and even though it is disappointing to the water park customers, I think this is a smart decision.”

It is uncertain when the Ohio Department of Health and Governor DeWine will feel comfortable in lifting restrictions of social distancing as well as keeping certain businesses closed to the public. Current public health data trends from many communities around the state, nation, and globe, as well as epidemic studies on previous pandemics are driving public health officials to recommend what is best to keep people safe and alive.

Epidemic studies were only part of the details influencing the pool closure; we also examined current and historical financial data. Hiawatha Water Park has never had a year in its existence when it ended in the black, but has had deficits year after year despite a reduction in annual deficits over the past two years.

City Auditor Terry Scott also advised the Mayor on his decision, citing not only his public health concerns, but the financial hardship on the taxpayers given a time when the City is reducing expenditures where possible. Scott also mentioned his concerns about the summer programs to City Council at the March 23rd meeting held in the Knox County Memorial Theater. Since then, more financial and public health information has come to light.

“Depending on the Governor's orders to potentially extend the order of stay-at-home, it will be evident that interested parties who may have purchased a season membership would definitely not consider doing so, even if the season was only for a short time,” Scott said.

Membership applications are significantly down. As such, miniscule revenues are coming in to pay for the water park programs. Scott further explained that due to layoffs, members will likely not pay the \$200/\$220 for a family membership covering June through mid-August that could only afford them a month to a month and a half of actual participation time for a limited season. “Even if we reduced the season pass price, we'd still earn only half the income, possibly, but we'd still have the overhead costs, not knowing who or how many would actually show up,” Scott added.

The community experienced layoffs which were similar to the economic climate in 2009/2010 with the great recession. Essentially, families did not have extra dollars to purchase memberships, nor did those who may have occasionally been walk-in patrons have resources to make a visit or two to the park. When families earnings are shortened, and for some it could be for a longer period of time than for others, the extra-curricular activities always get cut out of the family budget first, and survival mode is to pay for the needs of the family, not the wants of the family.

“This is more truth than fiction here, and we have experienced it a couple of times during the 13 years of operating this facility,” said Scott.

The City also carefully considered the risk of a medical out-break that could "possibly" be traced back to our water park, similar to the case that Health Commissioner Miller noted earlier. Such an occurrence could be a very serious matter, not to mention a costly matter to resolve. “While we may not know exactly who may have infected others, we would still have fingers pointing to us that some would say, why did you do it in the first place?” said Starr.

Scott and Dzik agreed. “We definitely wouldn't want a matter like this to give us a big black eye for years into the future.”

The final measure the City examined in their decision was regarding food and concessions. The need to have to prepare and/or serve concessions in a manner we have not had to use before would be or could be an expense for which the City has not planned. Perhaps the "type" of food items could be curtailed to only a small selection, which in itself would not be a welcoming matter for patrons.

“Again, it is about the safety of the public that we have to strive for,” said Starr.

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