

April 17, 2020

COVID 19 Message #5

Mayor Bill Beamish, Town of Gibsons

“By staying apart we will survive together”

It has been one month since the Provincial COVID 19 Emergency was proclaimed by the Provincial Government here in BC., and we continue to experience one of the most difficult challenges that many of us have, and ever will, face again.

- Families are separated, grandparents from grandchildren, parents from children, each one struggling to resist the temptation to travel but knowing that if they do, they expose themselves and their loved ones to risk;
- Businesses are closed and without income;
- Workers are unemployed and struggling to meet financial commitments like rent, or mortgage and loan payments;
- And all of us – particularly our most vulnerable – are at risk as we move through the community.

We have learned a new language of pandemic – “COVID-19”, “self-isolating”, “social distancing” and “Zoom” have entered our daily vocabulary.

Many of us go about our day wearing masks on the streets and in stores, even though we live in a beautiful place with good air quality.

Daily, we are bombarded by news stories and briefings from politicians and doctors who provide updated statistics about the number of people who have contracted COVID-19, or recovered, or died. And we mourn silently, unable to gather or hug loved ones who are not self- isolating with us.

We have new heroes. Dr. Bonnie Henry, who daily monitors the progress of the virus in our communities and issues orders to keep us safe. Sunshine Coast doctors, healthcare workers, first responders, and pharmacists. Grocery store owners and their staff, delivery drivers, the friends and neighbours who shop for us, and an army of community workers and volunteers.



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I am proud of the many community leaders, residents and helpers that I am privileged to work with at this time. I have had the opportunity to see and feel their passion for our community and everyone in it, and I share that passion.

I also share the frustration, fear and anxiety that many of you have when we see ferry loads of tourists and seasonal residents coming to our community. Some show blatant disregard for the new rules and protocols we are all following, thereby putting us and our families at risk. Clearly, this is wrong.

Because BC's Medical Health Officer is not providing community-specific information about COVID-19 patients or deaths, we must assume that we ourselves, our neighbours and anyone who visits our community are COVID-19 positive and act accordingly.

We must remain two metres apart, wash our hands often and, if you have one, wear a mask or face-covering when shopping. Perhaps most importantly, we must also remain at home, as much as possible.

I know that as a community, we are doing our best to follow these rules. Our streets are empty, our parks and trails are quiet, and those who are using them are very respectful of each others' personal space. In addition, our local businesses have implemented procedures to help us limit our exposure when we must go shopping – and we are respecting those procedures.

Unfortunately, we observed an influx of visitors to Gibsons and the Sunshine Coast this past weekend. In my view, this should not have happened.

While many of our residents stay at home in their own community, some visitors have chosen to wander freely on our beaches and in our public areas, perhaps thinking that our community is a COVID-free sanctuary, where they can relax and de-stress.

The negative reaction to these visitors was immediate and understandable. Emails filled my inbox and those of other local politicians, and our phone volumes increased dramatically. Signs appeared in the community, chastising visitors and demanding that they Go Home.

The signs ranged from subtle to offensive, but all messages were voiced out of the fear, stress and frustration caused by a few people who consciously chose to ignore the requests of BC's Medical Health Officer and instead, come for a mini-vacation in our community.



While I struggle to make sense of the behaviours of some visitors, I am also reminded that our community has many seasonal residents who own property in Gibsons and on the Sunshine Coast.

In many cases, these people are our neighbours. So, while we may be concerned that they chose to travel against Dr Henry's recommendation, we must also remember that they are not violating any orders and may have legitimate reasons for being here. We should also give each other the benefit of the doubt, by assuming that the people we meet on our streets and in our stores are following the same rules we are.

On behalf of our community, I, along with other elected officials on the Sunshine Coast, have made representations to Dr. Henry and to Adrian Dix, BC's Minister of Health, requesting that they address the inter-regional travel by residents and visitors in stronger terms.

We have suggested that a Provincial Order be considered to prohibit all non-essential travel on BC Ferries and that only Sunshine Coast residents be allowed to travel between Langdale and Horseshoe Bay. This has not happened nor, as our Medical Health Officer stated today, is it going to happen soon.

In the absence of a Provincial Order, I believe that we, as a community, need to carefully consider who we are and how we should react with respect to visitors. Gibsons is the "Home of the Beachcombers", a place that resonates strongly with people everywhere. We are a welcoming community, which relies heavily on visitors to support our local economy and provide jobs for our residents.

However, Gibsons is also a community of seniors – the demographic that is most vulnerable to this virus. In BC, the average age of people admitted to hospital due to COVID-19 is 68 and the median age of people infected is 54. In Gibsons, the average age of our residents is over 50 – one of the highest in BC. Accordingly, I think we have valid reason to be more concerned and vigilant than many other communities.

According to Dr. Henry's update on April 17th, the province is considering options to ease some restrictions that have been put in place – but not quite yet.

Her key message is that: *"It is essential that everyone in BC continue to practice strong physical distancing until directed otherwise. We know we still face the potential of growth in cases and deaths in British Columbia."*



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She went on to say that although she recognizes the real need for social connection and for families to be able to get together, the recommendations respecting regional travel will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

I know that it is tough at this time to view visitors as other than threats to our health, but it is only by working together, as a united and supportive community, that we will recover socially and economically.

In short, please continue to do what you are doing and follow Dr Henry's directions. It is working.

And if you are anxious about tourists in our community and want to express your concerns, please be respectful. In a few weeks or months, we will urgently need visitors to come to the Sunshine Coast and support our businesses.

Let's be considerate of our actions today, so that we do not damage our reputation as a welcoming tourism town and hurt future opportunities for our economy to recover.

In this day of social media, nothing we say or do is lost, and nothing is forgotten.

Thank you – and stay well.

On Behalf Of Gibsons Council,

Mayor Bill Beamish

A Message to Visitors:

Today, BC's Medical Health Officer confirmed her recommendation that regional non-essential travel should not be undertaken at this time.

As a result, we ask that if you are planning to visit Gibsons, please, do not come now – not today or this weekend, not until Dr Henry confirms that it is safe for us to travel freely.



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In the meantime, we will look forward to your visit and to the time when we will also be able to travel, and to gather with friends and family. However, in order for that to happen, we all need to work together, support each other and give one another physical space.

Please come another time.

If you do need to come to our community for essential travel, please remember that we are not a COVID-19 free zone. You are still required to follow the directions the Medical Health Officer with respect to social distancing, not gathering in groups and washing your hands frequently.

And if you do need to visit our stores, please be respectful and purchase only what you need to consume during your stay here. Thank you.



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