

## First local COVID-19 cases confirmed

By Edie Sutterfield

A Stone County employee was confirmed positive for the COVID-19 virus Sunday, and County Judge Stacey Avey and nine other employees are under voluntary quarantine this week.

Avey said Sunday night that the affected employee became ill last Thursday night and obtained a COVID-19 test on Friday, waiting until Sunday for a result. Although not experiencing symptoms, Avey and others who had been in contact with the employee were asked to self-isolate for two weeks as a precaution.

Avey explained that the employee resides in another county, so the case will not be assigned to Stone County on the Arkansas Department of Health map that tracks cases by county.

Stone County had other tests pending and was added to the map Monday with 1-4 cases.

Offices in the courthouse and county court complex are not affected by this quarantine and will continue to serve the public according to the new procedures announced last week (see related story).

Avey said it was the recommendation of the Association of Arkansas Counties (AAC) that public access to buildings be temporarily suspended. County officials are also studying how to minimize the threat to office employees, including working from home when possible and maintaining the smallest staff needed in each office.

With public health officials recommending a halt to all gatherings of more than 10 people, everything from emergency response procedures to funeral planning is being affected.

Stone County Emergency Services Officer Glen Crymes addressed last week's announcement that fire department First Responders will no longer respond to medical calls.

In the case of emergency calls of a life-threatening nature, these responders will still be paged, Crymes clarified. It is only for non-emergency medical calls that they will not be called out. Vital Link will respond to these first, and if they need additional help they may still request it from the First Responders.

Crymes explained that this is a statewide change in policy that is meant to comply with the limitation on gathering size. It is an attempt to minimize the overall spread of COVID-19.

"The less people you can have in a group, the better off you are," he said.

This will not apply to accidents or, of course, fires. In the case of accidents, there can be

as many people on the scene as needed.

Crymes expressed his support for the measures being taken to slow the spread of the virus. He said a lot of people do not understand or don't believe it's necessary, but he takes the threat seriously.

"The biggest thing is people need to stay away from one another. Six feet is the minimum you need to be away from someone."

Local government officials will also be struggling to conduct their public meetings in a safe manner.

Meetings of public bodies are legally required to be open to the public but in many cases would violate the recommended limitation on gatherings, especially if members of the public attend just to watch.

The regularly scheduled school board meeting for March was canceled.

Mountain View City Council has canceled its regular meetings until further notice and will schedule special meetings if necessary.

Avey said the Stone County Quorum Court is required to meet in person to vote on certain matters. April 9, for example, they are slated to vote on an ordinance relating to the sale of bonds for the jail. Votes must be taken during an in-person gathering, and meetings cannot be sealed to the public.

Avey said he has been advised by the AAC that the quorum court meet, with media present, and place a sign on the door recommending that the public not attend because of the virus threat. Minutes and recordings of all meet-

ings are available as part of the public record.

The decision by Stone County Recycling Center to halt all curbside pick-up and drop-off of recyclables last week sparked some concern about the continuity of operations at Stone County Solid Waste facility. Avey said there is no plan to interrupt service at the transfer station. Payments will

be made through the office window.

Also, the countywide clean-up day ("free day") is still planned for April 4, with the recommendation that everyone participating practice the recommended social distancing.

The recycling center will continue to do its cardboard pick-up at businesses, Avey noted.

Avey expressed concern about the local economic impact of the virus.

Excel Boats closed its manufacturing facility in Mountain View last week, pending testing of an employee who was possibly infected with COVID-19, as well as testing of the spouse of another employee. Those tests were still pending

as of presstime Monday.

Meanwhile, stores, restaurants, and tourist attractions are closing, and events are canceled or postponed, including the Arkansas Folk Festival.

"If this goes on a month, of things closing like we are now, you're going to have an economic problem," Avey said.



Council members meet in special session Friday. From left are Dana Woods, Truman Bullard, Mayor Roger Gardner, City Clerk Peggy Lancaster, Danny Simmons and J.K. Williams.

## City to proceed with tax election

During one of two special meetings on Friday, the Mountain View City Council agreed to proceed with the May 12 special election requesting an extension of the one-cent sales tax for sewer improvements.

Mayor Roger Gardner explained that a ballot must be filed 47

days prior to an election but because of the situation with COVID-19 emergency conditions, the city must make a decision about proceeding with the election. Having poll workers and people gathered at a polling site would be a concern, he said, but the number of people

allowed in the building could be limited.

If the election is postponed, it would likely be July or August before it could be held. The city has a Dec. 31, 2020 date to be in compliance. Gardner said the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality does not want to consider an extension until it is determined if the bonds can be refinanced.

The mayor reported that readings at the wastewater treatment plant had been good with the exception of one caused by an error in manual operation. There are still overflows because of inflow and infiltration. He said he attempted to contact ADEQ earlier in the week but got no

response.

If ballots are prepared and the election is cancelled at the last minute, the city could be out \$6,000-\$7,000, but Gardner said he would do that if necessary. The state election commission could prohibit elections from taking place. He had requested figures of the exact cost from the county clerk but did not receive them prior to the meeting.

It's also possible that the city could be fined for not meeting the deadline, but Gardner said he does not think that will happen with the pandemic taking place.

Councilmen in attendance voted to proceed with the election. Ricky Shuttleworth and Bruce Stevens were absent.

## Restrictions suspended

During one of two special meetings on Friday, the Mountain View City Council agreed to suspend the ordinance limiting food vendors to specified time periods and locations.

At least one local restaurant has asked to be allowed to set up its concession trailer to serve customers during the COVID-19 emergency conditions. The council agreed for food vendors to be allowed to set up anywhere in the city temporarily.

Four council members present discussed what the situation would have been if the severe

weather the previous night had resulted in widespread power outages or other damage requiring outside workers to come into town. With some local restaurants closed and others limiting service, food concessions might have been necessary.

Alderman J.K. Williams said having concessions open might help elderly residents.

Mayor Roger Gardner recommended the action, saying the city should err on the side of caution.

Aldermen Ricky Shuttleworth and Bruce Stevens were absent.



Garrick and Melissa Hess of Mountain View do business with Melissa Stricklin at the service window of the Stone County Assessor's Office last week.

## County officials continue duties

Stone County government offices are now doing business as follows:

Stone County Judge: Stacey Avey, phone 870-269-3351; e-mail sc\_judge@yelcot.net.

County Road: 870-269-4171

Stone County Assessor: Heather Stevens, phone 870-269-3524; Fax 870-269-9798. There is a service window on west side of assessor building. E-mail Heather@stone-countyassessor.org; Online - www.countyservice.net and www.arcountydata.com.

Stone County Collector: Sue Younger, phone 870-269-2211;

Online - www.ar.gov/tax. To pay delinquent amounts, please call 870-269-2211 and they will come to the courthouse door or your car.

Stone County and Circuit Clerk: Angie Hudspeth-Wade, Circuit phone 870-269-3271, County phone 870-269-5550, Fax 870-269-2303; E-mail - stoneclerk@yelcot.net. Fines and child support can be paid at a service window on the north side of the building. Marriage licenses can also be bought at the service window.

Stone County Treasurer: Carla Stewart, phone 870-269-8426.