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County Works On COVID-19 Policies, Hospital Lease

Ashley County Quorum Court adopted three ordinances at its meeting last week, including one that provides the county guidance on how to address employee COVID-19 testing.

The ordinance specifies that employees who request time off under the Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act have to notify their department heads or elected officials in writing "as soon as the need becomes known."

The ordinance also gives the county the right to pay for COVID-19 testing of employees who have symptoms or who have been in close contact with someone who had tested positive for the virus when they request time off.

"To be eligible for county payment of COVID-19 testing, the employee must notify their department head or elected official prior to seeking a test and obtain consent," the ordinance reads. "The employee must also use the healthcare provider specified by the department head or elected official."

The ordinance goes on to say that employees can consult with a health care provider of their choice, but that the county won't pay for that test.

As adopted, the ordinance also states that employees who know they have been in close contact with a COVID-positive person are supposed to quarantine in alignment with the state health department's guidance, but also that, "County employees are deemed to be 'critical infrastructure workers' as used in the (Arkansas Department of Health) Quarantine Order. Therefore, based on specific office needs at the time of the quarantine period, an employee who is not symptomatic and who has not received a positive test result, may still be required to report to work and to follow additional safety measures during the recommended quarantine period."

As adopted, the ordinance also allows the county to discipline or fire employees who violate a quarantine order.

In other news, the body approved a one-year extension to the Crossett Health Foundation's 10-year lease on the county-owned hospital, Ashley County Medical Center.

The lease is now valid through Sept. 15, 2030. It was last reviewed in 2019.

The 10-year lease on the facility was first approved in 1998 and has been rolled forward by one year every year since then, effectively giving the foundation a perpetual 10-year lease.

The annual review and extension was written into the initial lease agreement, and the quorum court is required to roll it forward as long as the foundation is not in default.

The quorum court voted to approve a number of budget line item changes as presented by the county treasurer's office.

Positive Cases Noted On Local Campuses

Officials with Hamburg School District announced Monday that an Albritton Elementary School employee had tested positive for COVID-19.

The announcement, made via an open letter to parents that was also posted on social media, said that all of the employee's probably close contacts had been notified.

"The proper steps have been taken in notifying the Arkansas Department of Health and we have received protocol in which to follow," the letter said. "Chris Hammond, our Point of Contact, is working with AD and continues

to receive guidance."

Classes are set to continue in all school buildings at this time.

"I would like to publicly commend Albritton Elementary for the steps that have been taken to slow down the spread," Superintendent Tracy Streeter said in the letter. "I cannot say enough about the work and the precautions that have been done by the staff of Hamburg School District. It has shown, in the number of cases we have had and in the slowness of the spread, that HSD has followed the guidelines to prevent the spread."

The letter said the district can-

not legally disclose more information at this time, but that if circumstances change and there is more to report, the district will do so.

"Please know the safety of our students and staff is our first priority," Streeter said. "This is not something we are taking lightly."

Crossett School District likewise notified parents of a positive case of COVID-19 at Crossett High School.

Crossett's notice was published late Sunday, and it said that the district had notified all probably close contacts.

"If you have not been contact-

ed you do not meet the criteria based on the information provided to the district," that notice said.

Classes have continued in all CSD buildings since the publication.

"We appreciate the work and cooperation of our students, staff, and parents during this situation," Superintendent Gary Williams said in the notice.

"Again, if you have not been contacted you are not considered a Probable Close Contact. Please monitor our website and social media for updates as they become available."

Post COVID Spending, Income Inch Upward

Personal income and spending have grown for three consecutive months; however, wages, salaries and rental incomes still lag below pre-COVID-19 levels, according to the latest Bureau of Economic Analysis "Personal Income and Outlays" report.

"The headline from the report was that personal income increased by 0.4 percent in July compared to the prior month," economist John Anderson said. "Most pre-report estimates were calling for a slight decline, so the report was a generally positive surprise for the market. Adding to the positive tone, the increase in personal income was entirely accounted for by an increase in worker compensation as opposed to government transfers."

Anderson is head of the agricultural economics and agribusiness department for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture and the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural Food and Life Sciences. He has been providing pandemic-related analyses of the economy since March.

"Total personal income is well above its pre-COVID level because government social benefits remain historically quite high," he said. Federal COVID-related "transfer payments did decline in July compared to June, primarily the result of a decline in unemployment benefits, but they remain far above pre-COVID levels."

For example, in January, government social benefits totaled \$3,158 billion. In July, government social benefits amounted to \$4,867 billion, an increase of 54 percent, due mostly to enhanced unemployment benefits.

Consumer spending Anderson called consumer spending in July "somewhat unusual."

"Spending on durable goods has been quite strong, considering that we are currently in a rather sharp recession," he said. "Spending on big-ticket items that we would normally expect to struggle in a recessionary environment has grown markedly over the course of the year, and more specifically, since April."

Boats rise with the tide Anderson said, for example, spending on pleasure boats increased this year. He selected boats because they are "kind of an iconic discretionary purchase. However, the same basic point could be made with RVs or motorcycles as well. A lot more spending growth in these categories than I would expect in the middle of a 'normal' recession."

"For example, expenditures on pleasure boats were 36 percent higher in July than in January," Anderson said. "In contrast, over the course of the last major recession — the Great Recession in 2007-2010 — spending in that category fell by about half."

When compared to July 2019, boat sales in July 2020 were up almost 31 percent. While the differences between boat sales in January and July may seem simply seasonal, the BEA statistics are adjusted for seasonality. For comparison, between January 2019 and July 2019, boat sales declined 4 percent.

Travel and leisure spending remained severely curtailed, however.

"Until consumers regain the confidence to resume social exposure — at work and in recreational settings — and until social distancing guidelines allow such a resumption, spending in these categories will continue to lag," Anderson said.

Ashley County Health Unit To Be Site Of Flu Vaccines, COVID-19 Testing

On Monday, Sept. 21, the Ashley County Health Unit of the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH) will offer flu vaccinations at the Health Unit, 401 N. Cherry, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. in conjunction with COVID-19 tests.

People should take their insurance cards, Medicaid, or Medicare cards to the flu vaccine clinic. If they do not have insurance, or the insurance does not cover flu shots, the vaccine will be available at no charge.

"We want Ashley County residents to stay healthy this flu season, and getting a yearly flu vaccination is the best line of defense," Tammy Cook, Ashley County Health Unit administrator, said. "We encourage everyone to come to the Ashley County Health Unit to get their flu shot."

Annual flu vaccination is recommended for most adults and children six months and older. The flu virus changes from year to year, and this year's vaccine protects against the flu viruses that are expected to cause the most illness this flu season.

"The flu should not be taken lightly," said Dr. Jennifer Dillaha, medical director for immunizations at ADH. "We are encouraging everyone to get a flu shot to protect themselves

and their families, because it is hard to predict in advance how severe the flu season is going to be."

People of all ages can get the flu. Certain people are more likely to have serious health problems if they get the flu. This includes older adults, young children, pregnant women, people with chronic health conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease), people who smoke, and people who live in nursing homes. Therefore, ADH strongly recommends that people in these groups get a flu vaccine. It is also recommended that friends, family members and people who provide care to people in these groups also get a vaccine—not only to protect themselves but also to decrease the possibility that they might expose the people they love and care for to the flu.

The flu vaccine is safe and does not cause the flu, according to ADH. Some people may have mild soreness and redness near the site of the shot and a low fever or slight headache. There are very few medical reasons to skip the flu vaccine. These include life-threatening allergic reactions to a previous dose of the flu vaccine or an ingredient in

the vaccine. People with allergies to vaccine ingredients can often receive the vaccine safely, if it is given in a doctor's office where they can be monitored.

The flu is easily spread through coughing or sneezing and by touching something, such as a doorknob, with the virus on it, and then touching one's nose or mouth. Good hand washing habits are important in preventing the flu; however, ADH has said that the best way to prevent the flu is to get the vaccine.

COVID-19 testing will also be available. To protect yourself and others, the ADH recommends:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available.

- Practice physical distancing. Avoid close contact with others, especially those who are sick, by keeping at least six feet apart.

- If you think you have been exposed to COVID-19 or develop a fever, cough, or shortness of breath, seek testing. ADH Local Health Units provide testing.

- Wear a face covering when you are exposed to non-household members and physical distancing cannot be assured.



Ashley County team Arkansas Impact kicks off their season by playing in the 12U Diamonds Are Forever tournament at University of Louisiana in Monroe last weekend. The girls placed second. Players pictured are (front, from left) Zoey Jones, Barrett Bays, Beck Hartley, (middle) Alaina Robinson, Sophie Herrera, McKinley Jackson, Alaiza Middlebrooks, (back) Rylee Meeks, GG Tucker, MJ Esquivel, and Gracie Kilcrease along with Coaches Zach Meeks, Josh Hartley, and Robin Robinson.

USDA Forecasts 23 Percent Rise In 2020 Net Farm Income, Due Largely To Government Payments

Net farm income for U.S. producers in 2020 is forecast to rise 23 percent over 2019 figures, growing to about \$102.7 billion, according to a report this week from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

The growth in overall income has occurred despite falling cash receipts for almost every sector of the agricultural economy, from row crops to cattle sales, according to an analysis prepared by James Mitchell, assistant professor of livestock marketing and management for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Mitchell's analysis shows that the recovery is largely due to direct payments from the federal government, as well as ad hoc and emergency payments delivered in reaction to natural disasters.

"USDA forecasts 2020 direct

farm payments at \$37.2 billion, a 65.7 percent increase over 2019 direct farm payments," Mitchell said. "These direct government payments for 2020 will account for 36.2 percent of net farm income. In 2019, direct payments accounted for 26.8 percent of net farm income."

Supplemental and "ad hoc" payments for COVID-19 pandemic relief account for most of the increase in direct farm payments, Mitchell said. While the USDA report was published on Sept. 2, it forecast farm income through Dec. 31.

Overall, cash receipts for crops are forecast to rise about 1 percent over 2019, with food grains falling more than 6 percent, feed crops falling nearly 4.5 percent and cotton falling more than 7 percent. One notable rise in 2020 is cash receipts from fruits and nuts, which is forecast to rise more than 17 percent over

2019.

From 2011-2018, annual direct farm program and disaster payments remained between \$10 billion and \$15 billion; in 2019, they exceeded \$20 billion before continuing their rise to current levels. Similarly, supplemental and ad hoc disaster assistance accounted for a very small percentage of farm net income over the past decade — the most notable deviation being 2014, when such assistance accounted for 5.1 percent of net farm income. In 2020, by comparison, disaster assistance is projected to account for about 22.8 percent of net farm income, according to Mitchell's analysis.

The analysis is part of a series of impact reports regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on agriculture and other aspects of the economy from the Division of Agriculture. Find Mitchell's analysis and others

at <https://bit.ly/AR-Ag-Eco-Impacts2020>.

To learn more about extension programs in Arkansas, contact the local Cooperative Extension Service agent or visit www.uaex.edu.

About the Division of Agriculture

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture's mission is to strengthen agriculture, communities, and families by connecting trusted research to the adoption of best practices. Through the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service, the Division of Agriculture conducts research and extension work within the nation's historic land grant education system.

The Division of Agriculture is one of 20 entities within the University of Arkansas System. It has offices in all 75 counties in Arkansas and faculty on five system campuses.

