

2020: Year in Review

By Sarah Cavacini on Wednesday, December 30, 2020

Masks are common sights today. “Social distancing” is a common phrase. Don’t forget about hand-washing for 20 seconds and quarantining. These terms couldn’t be escaped in 2020 – the year of the coronavirus pandemic.

No area of life went unaffected during the pandemic. The Crescent City Catfish Festival was one of the first events canceled because of COVID-19. Sports would soon follow, along with schools, restaurants and other businesses closing their doors. The Putnam County Board of Commissioners declared a state of emergency in March.

In April, a 54-year-old Palatka man was the first Putnam County resident to die from coronavirus. Through Tuesday, the county had reported 71 coronavirus-related deaths.

Because of COVID-19, Gov. Ron DeSantis issued a statewide stay-at-home order in April, which signaled how the rest of the year would go. The quarantine was followed by more event cancellations, mask recommendations and a vaccine by the end of the year. Government meetings moved to Zoom, Palatka city officials issued a mask mandate and many public areas in Putnam County were shut down.

“Especially in the beginning, we (had) very little information about the virus and what it entailed, (and it) required all of us to learn and adapt quickly,” Putnam Community Medical Center CEO Mark Dooley said. “... We continue to see some of the same challenges, but the primary challenge that we and all hospitals are facing is the toll this has taken on our staff, especially those on the front lines. They are the true heroes in all of this, and there is not enough that I can do to express our gratitude to them.”

However, health care workers were not the only employees affected.

County Administrator Terry Suggs said the pandemic brought a variety of county modifications. Board of County Commissioners meetings moved online for six months, as did other meetings, and many county staff members began working in Putnam’s Emergency Operations Center.

Coronavirus upset the Putnam County officials’ daily routines this year, but officials said they were proud of how the community handled changes.

“It’s amazing how much you will adapt to a situation,” Suggs said.

Although the county adapted, Suggs said employees still worried with each surge in cases or lockdown. Plexiglas barriers were installed at the county office in Palatka and staff wore masks to keep each other safe.

A lockdown brought a loss of income for many households and small businesses. But, starting in August, the Board of County Commissioners distributed thousands of dollars locally as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act grants.

“The federal government stepping in and making those funds available – not only to our small businesses but our nonprofits and now the individual assistance program – I think has been extremely helpful,” Suggs said.

Grants expanded later to include households and nonprofit organizations that benefit Putnam. The money could be used to pay rent, mortgages and utility payments.

Suggs recognized weekly food drives as “life-saving” for residents struggling to make a living. He and other county staff members were able to help distribute food in a drive-thru style, but the giveaways haven’t stopped, and hundreds of cars line up along State Road 17 every Friday to receive meals.

“When you live in a blue-collar community like we do here in (Putnam County), it’s amazing how people have pulled together,” Suggs said.

Younger generations did not escape COVID-19 impacts, either, as the Putnam County School District went virtual after the pandemic began. Student lessons were conducted through Zoom and kids saw extracurricular activities and proms canceled.

“District staff quickly stepped up and put a plan in place to (make sure) our children’s needs were front and center,” Superintendent Rick Surrency said in an email. “Everyone was treated with compassion and grace as we moved toward a system that encouraged learning and safety at all levels. Educational, emotional, and health, safety and nutritional needs were evaluated with systems tweaked until we made it to our current system.”

As students and teachers returned in August, options to learn online were still available. Students were asked to quarantine if they had contact with a COVID-positive person and masks were required in schools.

Surrency said students seemed happy to be back and the school district employees did everything they could to keep morale high while looking out for students’ best interests. Virtual meetings as well as the option to learn online are expected to continue as 2021 begins Friday, the superintendent said.

“Our district has become stronger as a result of this pandemic,” Surrency said. “All of our students, staff and parents have shown that we can overcome adversity when all of us work together. As we near the end of the pandemic, there will be a degree of normalcy. However, some ways that we do school will change forever.”

Putnam Community was greatly impacted because of COVID-19 and Dooley said uncertainty added to challenges hospital staff faced.

“So many have stepped up and gone above and beyond the call of duty, but that also takes a toll physically and emotionally,” he said in an email. “The morale of our staff is as good as can be

expected during these times – we are blessed with some very caring, compassionate and resilient people at Putnam.”

Dooley said he had not seen anything like COVID-19 in his years of experience and believed the COVID-inspired changes would be here for a while. These changes include a mask requirement, temperature checks and limiting visitors – and for a while, nursing home and hospital residents could not receive visitors as mandated by the state.

As of Tuesday, the hospital had 19 coronavirus patients and 110 people have been vaccinated, Dooley said.

“We do not have and do not anticipate receiving enough doses to offer (vaccinations) to the community,” he said. “We have developed a tiered system whereby front-line staff in the (emergency department), (intensive care unit) and other patient care areas that treat COVID patients were offered the vaccine first. Once we received more doses late last week, we opened the opportunity to all staff interested.”

Dooley said the virus is something no one expected and has been challenging for health care workers who put themselves on the front lines daily.

“We hope to never experience an event like this one in the future but going through this has reinforced to all of us that when faced with adversity, we have a wonderful group of people ready to step up and meet any challenge,” he said.

The Florida Department of Health in Putnam County also faced something staff members had never seen before.

“We’ve always talked about pandemics and we’ve talked about flu seasons and we’ve talked about H1N1 and we’ve done this,” Administrator Mary Garcia said. “... We always have read about (pandemics), studied it, but it’s not something we had actively lived through like this.”

Garcia and her team conduct testing at 1101 Husson Ave. in Palatka where residents can get free COVID-19 testing. As of Tuesday, 3,859 people have tested positive since the pandemic began.

Garcia thinks the virus will stick around for a bit longer but said vaccine opportunities could be coming soon.

“We’re working on that methodology to be able to send information out and have individuals that are interested in it sign up,” she said. “That’ll be coming out in a couple weeks. We’re not quite ready for that.”

Putnam County did experience some positivity during a pandemic year in the way of business. Chamber of Commerce President Dana Jones said high revenues from the previous fiscal year meant the bed tax revenues remained high.

Jones said Comarco Products in Palatka conducted a hiring spree in June, Georgia-Pacific generated the need for temporary workers with ongoing projects and new food choices such as Firehouse Subs and Captain D's provided growth in 2020.

"Those were little bright spots in the economy," she said.

The Azalea Festival was the last large event to occur before other popular events such as the Blue Crab Festival, Bostwick Blueberry Festival and Palatka Christmas Parade were canceled due to COVID-19. Jones said hospitality workers were hit hard from shutdowns and cancelations.

She commended business owners for adapting to changes and reinventing how their businesses operated. She said the biggest challenge was trying to understand the safest COVID-19 practices because they changed day-to-day as health officials learned more about coronavirus.

"I think what we're going to see is a new normalcy," Jones said. "I don't think things will be like they were before in 2021. I think events will come back but I think they will be planned different and conducted differently just like we know that will happen with retail sales and everything else in the world."

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