



TOWN OF CHINCOTEAGUE, INC.

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 21, 2020**

**PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT #4
TOWN OF CHINCOTEAGUE**

COVID-19

A Message from Mayor Arthur Leonard

As our island, state, and nation faces the unique new circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, I feel that I must address Chincoteague Island's citizens, workers, property owners, business owners, and visitors. I know this is a challenging time, and the town office will continue to be transparent with you. Our priority is the health and wellbeing of our community, visitors, and neighbors.

First off, I want to share my knowledge of the current situation in our community. As of March 21 at 11 am, there have been no positive cases of COVID-19 on Chincoteague Island; however, several people from our immediate area have been tested, and two people in Accomack County have been confirmed positive. There are also confirmed cases in nearby counties where our residents work and visit regularly. There are an increasing number of cases of COVID-19 in the United States, and we will likely see more cases in our community regardless of municipal action. In all likelihood, this virus is already loose in our community and we just don't know it yet because either nobody is sick enough to be tested, or they don't meet the stringent criteria for testing. It is important for everyone to take precautions to protect themselves and our community, such as cleaning your hands often, avoiding close contact with others, staying home when you're sick, and cleaning and disinfecting surfaces regularly. A person who does not have symptoms of COVID-19 can still spread the virus, so it is especially important to practice social distancing to protect others. We are a strong, close-knit community, and we can all look out for each other.

I urge everyone to abide by federal and state government guidance that everyone over the age of 65 should stay at home and practice social distancing until further notice. Other vulnerable populations should also stay home, including those with heart or lung disease, suppressed immune systems, and diabetes. Please have supplies dropped off at your door and strictly limit in-person contact until this crisis has passed.

We are also supporting the governor's "10-in" mandate, which states that no more than 10 patrons can be in any one enclosed space at any time. I applaud our local pharmacy, shops, restaurants, and hotels for immediately complying with this mandate and coming up with alternative solutions so quickly. Thank you for finding a way to serve our island in this difficult time. For a list of establishments offering modified services, please visit the Chamber's Health & Safety website at www.chincoteaguechamber.com.

I'd also like to remind everyone to observe social distancing recommendations by staying at least 6 feet away from others in the event that you do need to go out into public. Don't touch your face, and try to avoid "high touch" surfaces where viruses could survive. It is also absolutely critical that you frequently wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or sanitize if washing is not an option. If you feel sick, call ahead before visiting your doctor. For more information of how to protect yourself and others visit www.cdc.gov/coronavirus. For the latest information about COVID-19 in Virginia, visit vdh.virginia.gov.

To the local population, I want you to know that your town staff has been working tirelessly to ensure that our response to COVID-19 is effective and sustainable for our community. Our Town Council, Town Manager, Director of Emergency Services, and Police Chief have been in constant communication with each other and their counterparts in the federal, state, and county government to ensure we have the most up-to-date information and guidance. As the mayor, it's my job to join all of these different entities together to help make decisions to do the most good for our community. We have been working diligently to communicate these efforts to you via our website and social media accounts. I feel we have done the best we can in working towards successfully handling the response, mitigation, and recovery efforts surrounding COVID-19, and I pray that it will be enough to spare us from the worst of this storm.

That said, the economic impact of this pandemic cannot be overstated—especially since it's occurring during the spring, when the island is typically waking up from its annual winter hibernation. Estimates by town staff put the Town Government at an estimated loss of \$330,000 based on current federal guidelines. The reduced transient occupancy and meals tax revenues will affect many aspects of our town. If the governor decides to follow in the footsteps of other states and close all non-essential businesses, this toll will be even higher. Paying for all of the amenities and services we have become accustomed to will be impossible this year. Deciding what to cut is going to be very challenging and will require much deliberation in budget & personnel meetings. We welcome your input and will continue to be open and transparent with our community about these difficult decisions.

For those calling for us to close the causeway, I implore you to think about your neighbor who cooks in one of the local restaurants. The waitress, the store owner, the motel and hotel staff, the construction worker, the hairdresser, the mechanic, the waterman, the lady checking you out at the grocery store— they all depend on the very freedom to move about and provide the goods and services that we want and need. Think about why they are desperate to continue working right now. There is no "work from home" if you are in the service industry. These folks are trying to afford meals for their families, rent, mortgage, credit card payments, car payments, healthcare and medicine to name a few. Interrupting travel on and off the island at this point would not only be a logistical nightmare (Do we allow non-residents on to care for their resident parents? What about property owners? Do we really want to further delay our medical personnel from getting to and from their jobs?) A closure like this will not keep the virus out—as I said above, the virus is likely already spreading among our population. Responsibility here rests with the governor—if he mandates a non-essential business closure, he'll need to put a better safety net in place for our service workers. Maybe he's waiting until after the first round of federal stimulus checks, I don't know. Not everyone here has a financial nest egg, government check, or emergency fund to last a couple months with no work, or even the few weeks until unemployment insurance payments can kick in. Some don't have enough to feel comfortable about feeding their kids or affording their essential medication tomorrow, especially this time of year when they may be coming off of months of seasonally reduced hours or even

unemployment. These workers are another part of our population who we really need to look out for during this time of crisis.

To our business owners and managers, I urge you to keep the well-being of your staff at the forefront of your mind when you are making big and small decisions these next few weeks. If you employ anyone who wants to stay home or has been advised to self-quarantine, please encourage them to do so and support them in whatever way you can--whether that's helping them file an unemployment claim, giving them a box of gloves, or dropping off some groceries on their porch. For those members of your staff who want to work, please give them every opportunity to protect themselves from this virus. Put touch-free procedures in place, including propping open doors, taking credit card payments in advance over the phone, and utilizing contact-free curbside pickup options. Provide ample sanitizing supplies and practices to help your employees keep themselves as safe as possible while serving your customers and keeping your business going.

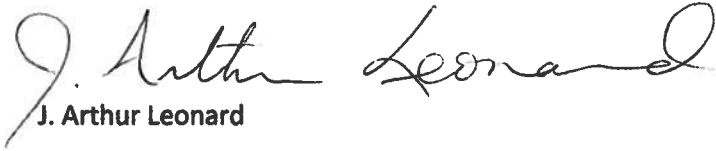
For those looking forward to visiting our island in the next few weeks, I'd like to ask you to pause and consider the impact your visit may have.

There are definitely positive impacts-- you'll help keep our tourism industry afloat, keeping food on our tables during a time of drastically reduced income and economic activity. You'll also help our small businesses survive. They generally operate on an annual cycle, and spring is when reserves are depleted and they rely on an influx of visitors to keep the lights on, bring the seasonal folks off of unemployment, and gear up for the hustle and bustle of summer. The end of winter into the beginning of Spring is always a hard time financially, but this year is going to be especially hard for our mom & pop's to make it. Your support is desperately needed and wanted right now by a whole industry of folks who depend on you to make a living.

On the other hand, your visit could have negative impacts. The island has limited supplies available for our residents. Shelves have been pretty empty over the last couple weeks, and we need to be sure our full-time islanders (especially the elderly and medically fragile) are taken care of because they don't have anywhere else to go. We also have extremely limited emergency and medical services. While we have some of the finest first responders anywhere, there are only a few paid paramedics, EMTs, and volunteers, and two ambulances available on this island. The Eastern Shore also has very limited hospital resources. Our personnel, equipment, and facilities will likely be stretched beyond capacity as the virus spreads and worsens over the next few weeks. Lastly, many of the events and activities that attract visitors to Chincoteague have been closed, postponed, or cancelled. If you're looking for a lot of planned events, amusements, and "things to do," that's not what you'll find on Chincoteague right now. You probably won't even be able to eat a meal at a restaurant. If you decide to come, I ask that you take these things in mind and plan as best you can to mitigate the negative impact of your visit. Bring supplies from home, limit your contact with others including service staff, and please please PLEASE do not come if you think you may have a need or develop a need for medical services.

The important thing to remember during this pandemic is to take care of yourself and those you love. Check on your family and neighbors. Keep a safe distance from everyone, but especially those who are at a higher risk. Maybe call up your favorite shop or restaurant and buy a gift card or get something delivered. Heck, we'd love it if visitors would take some time to plan your next trip for when this all settles down. While the most important things to take care of right now are our family and friends, we can't forget about the island, a place we all know and love.

Please join me and your Town Council and staff in working to ensure the island comes out of this pandemic as strong as possible. Thank you in advance for the sacrifices that you all will be making in the coming weeks for the benefit of our community's safety, economy, and health.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Arthur Leonard". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

J. Arthur Leonard

Mayor