

EDITORIAL

The worst of times bring out our best

These are strange and somewhat haunting times we're in. Schools closed. Gyms locked tight. Movie theater screens gone blank. You can't check out a book at the library (though they have some great online resources). You can't go to your favorite restaurants (though some are offering curbside pickup to take away some of the sting of lost business — and to provide us with some variety in our cuisine). You're supposed to avoid gatherings with friends, the very people who help us through dark times.

March can be bleak on Martha's Vineyard. The past couple of years it's been dark and stormy. Somehow, with COVID-19 knocking at our doors, we find ourselves longing for the punishing winds of a nor'easter over social distancing and what feels like an inevitable march toward lockdown.

Some on the Island have stepped up and shown leadership — Denise Schepici, CEO and president of Martha's Vineyard Hospital, is an example, as is Maura Valley, health agent for the town of Tisbury. We've been troubled by others who don't seem up for the assignment they've been given to lead during emergency situations.

We're also concerned that it's taken the Steamship Authority time to get onboard, saying they're following the guidance of health officials instead of implementing precautions weeks ago when it was clear that COVID-19 was headed this way. For weeks, there had not been a single sign asking passengers to wash their hands or separate from other passengers if they felt symptoms.

And history will not look kindly on President Donald Trump, who initially downplayed the significance of the pandemic, even pulling out the word "hoax" and saying it would be driven away by "beautiful April." That's because when he could have approved massive testing, he didn't. He's been quoted as saying he didn't want the numbers revealed by widespread testing because it would hurt his chances at re-election. In the past few days, though, he seems to have gotten the message this is a serious, possibly disas-

trous pandemic. His confusing messaging over the past three weeks has done little to calm citizens or Wall Street. A worry for another day for most of us, but for seniors living on those years of investments, the collapse is devastatingly real.

COVID-19 reached our shores five weeks after it arrived in Italy — a country that has struggled mightily to contain it — and yet we still see people holding parties, flocking to beaches in Florida like it's spring break, and being cavalier about the pandemic on social media.

We need to take this seriously. Listen to the experts. Nationally, Dr. Anthony Fauci has shown true leadership, breaking through the noise and, perhaps, behind the scenes getting through to the president. He said this on NBC's "Meet the Press" about young people, who are among the most cavalier about COVID-19: "I think they should be practicing social distancing because even if — and I think it's still true that younger people are at much, much less risk of getting into trouble — that doesn't mean they aren't going to get infected, and then they are going to infect the older people. So everybody should be taking really good care to avoid infection."

And locally, Michael Loberg, owner of Vineyard Medical Care and a member of the Tisbury board of health, provided sobering context while some people were making the case to continue holding public meetings. "Let me say that we don't want to make a mistake here if we can avoid it. The concept of social distance is partly to protect the patient. But what it's really intended to do is to flatten what they call the curve. There's a curve that is the number of infected over any period of time; if that curve goes up — we do nothing and that curve shoots up — all of a sudden that exponential growth hits the Island, hits our healthcare providers, and we will immediately lose the ability to defend ourselves medically. We just don't have enough resources. If you can flatten that curve, a couple of things happen — your healthcare providers can better stay on top of it ... but even more than that, because the facilities are working the way we want them to, the overall death rate will stay much lower. It will stay in that 1 percent range you hear about. We could get into the 3 percent range, the less-sophisticat-

ed-country range, if we really overwhelm our healthcare givers and our facilities."

In that vein, just as we did with climate change and sea level rise, we are not going to accept comments or Letters to the Editor that deny the science behind COVID-19.

We couldn't help but be taken by the signs of hope from Italy last week, one of the countries hardest hit by this pandemic. As of Wednesday morning, there were 27,980 confirmed cases, and 2,503 deaths in Italy.

But even in that devastated country, there have been signs of hope. People out on their balconies to sing the national anthem, or participating in a "flash crowd" session of clapping and cheering for their country's medical workers; others baking cakes with their children every day; military jets trailing with the colors of the Italian flag.

As we always do in times of crisis, we've seen signs on the Island of people offering support.

Folks at Grace Episcopal Church reach out daily by phone to the Island's most vulnerable population to make sure they're OK, and to see if they need any assistance with errands. The First Congregational Church of West Tisbury is doing similar outreach.

And there have been posts on social media by individuals like Marc Foley, who says he's ready to help out Island seniors any way he can.

Some businesses that have made the decision to close down, like Rosewater and Harbor View Hotel, noted that they will continue to pay their employees. Others, like restaurant owner J.B. Blau, is trying to match his 75-plus affected workers with employers who might need help during this time.

Our own employees have worked relentlessly to bring you the most updated information, as far back as our first post about coronavirus on Feb. 12. Everyone from our frontline reporters to those who sell advertisements and design the newspaper has pitched in to keep you updated as the flow of information has come in like a gushing river.

We don't know where we are headed. These are uncharted waters, and the seas are rough and seemingly relentless. But if we listen to the experts and avoid the noise, we'll get through this together and come out stronger and more resilient.

Stay home. Stay well.

EDITORIAL

Let the sunshine in

This week is National Sunshine Week, which was created by the American Society of News Editors "to educate the public about the importance of open government and the dangers of excessive and unnecessary secrecy."

Today we are joining our colleagues throughout New England in writing about the importance of open government and public records by highlighting some of the ways we've been thwarted by the government to better inform you, and to highlight some of the ways we've used them to shine a necessary spotlight that promoted change.

Sunshine Week is from March 15 to March 21, but it's really an everyday effort for us. Right now, some government agency has a public records request from us and they'll either do the right thing and turn them over or provide a reason to exempt them. If they withhold them, we'll use the state supervisor of public records to make a determination if that's a legitimate withholding of the records.

Last week, for example, we received documents from a public records request pertaining to a sexual harassment case involving an Edgartown police officer. The town turned over an independent investigation that must have worn out a black Sharpie. It is almost completely redacted. The town is claiming the personnel exemption in the public records law.

We're appealing to the state supervisor of public records who has been very clear on internal investigations involving police officers based on a court case between the Boston Globe and the Boston police commissioner. "Finally, Judge Grosso closed his discussion

by further delineating the difference between internal affairs records and disciplinary records by stating, 'it would be odd, indeed, to shield from the light of public scrutiny as personnel [file] or information the workings and determinations of a process whose quintessential purpose is to inspire public confidence,'" the supervisor's guidance about police investigations states.

Ultimately, the town will be forced to turn over a less redacted copy of their investigation, but for now we remain disappointed with the town's lack of transparency.

But Edgartown is not alone. It's a common practice for Tisbury's town attorney to play the cat and mouse game with public records. Most recently, it was the case of Stephen Nichols, the crossing guard who allegedly made threats against the Tisbury School. He was removed from his job, and had his guns seized. Initially, the town refused our request for public records citing the personnel exemption and ultimately the supervisor ruled in our favor. Tisbury, and more specifically, its attorney, has lost every case we've brought to appeal. Selectmen are promising to be more open and transparent after that last embarrassing episode. Time will tell if that happens.

In Oak Bluffs, it was public records surrounding former Fire Chief John Rose that ultimately shined the light on unrest in that department that had been bubbling at the surface for the better part of three years. A Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination complaint and lawsuit by a former employee claiming sexual harassment led to a payment by the town's insurance company to settle those claims. But it was the executive session minutes that were re-

leased that showed the divide among the town's selectmen. While at least one selectman wanted to fire Rose, others were willing to keep him on board and provide him with an action plan. When the records became public, the town and Rose worked out a separation agreement that allowed the chief to retire.

Reporter Rich Saltzberg has used public records on many fronts — frustrated but undeterred by the government's initial reaction to often balk at his requests. His reporting on the lead contamination at the West Chop housing for the U.S. Coast Guard is an example. As a result of his reporting that showed the Coast Guard knew about lead contamination surrounding the housing and didn't warn the families moving in, the Coast Guard came up with a plan to review its housing stock across the country for potential contaminants. There's still some information in the darkness on this one. In one of Saltzberg's recent Freedom of Information Act requests, the Coast Guard gave Edgartown a run for its money on use of a black Sharpie. We're appealing.

And it was Editor George Brennan's use of public records that showed a builder didn't have the proper permits when he bulldozed a historic house on Vineyard Haven Harbor called the Mill House, which was built before the Revolutionary War. That reporting prompted the town to come up with a way to create a database of historic buildings in Tisbury.

These are just a few of the many examples of our commitment to hold local, state, and the federal government accountable. As an industry, we celebrate that commitment during Sunshine Week. As a news organization, we live that commitment every day.

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Note to Readers

The Times welcomes Letters to the Editor on subjects of interest to Islanders. Each letter must include the name, address, and phone number of the writer. No exceptions, no anonymous letters, no pen names. All letters are subject to editing for style, taste, sense, and conciseness. A thousand words is the outer limit. We publish most letters, but not all. The editor chooses. Letters will normally be published in the week they are received, but not always. The Times accepts letters by hand, or by mail, e-mail, and FAX, or posted online at mvtimes.com (click on Submissions link).

J.K.