

MINUTES
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING OF THE VALDOSTA CITY COUNCIL
1:45 P.M., WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 13, 2021
COUNCIL CHAMBERS, CITY HALL

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mayor Scott James Matheson called the Special Called Meeting of the Valdosta City Council to order at 1:45 p.m. Council members present were: Joseph "Sonny" Vickers and Tim Carroll. Council members Sandra Tooley, Ben Norton, and Vivian Miller-Cody arrived late. Councilman Eric Howard and Councilman Andy Gibbs were absent. The invocation was given by Councilman Tim Carroll, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

AWARDS AND PRESENTATIONS

Presentation of a COVID-19 update by the South Health District.

Mayor Matheson stated that Dr. William R. Grow, M.D., F.A.C.P., South Health District Director, and Courtney Sheeley, South Health District Director of Communications & Special Projects, will provide an update on COVID-19.

Dr. William R. Grow thanked the Mayor and Council for the opportunity to present COVID-19 information and to discuss what the South Health District has been doing for the past few months. They have an incredible group, not only in Lowndes County, but also in the ten counties of the South Health District. They are motivated, committed, and passionate about what they do. In 1950, our nation had the polio epidemic and he received the polio vaccine from his grandfather. Everyone was scared to death to go anywhere. With the current COVID-19 Pandemic, we have had 20,000 cases documented in our District. We hope that, like with polio and smallpox (which does not exist anymore), we will get through this with vaccinations. Of the 20,000 cases, 15,000 of those are confirmed with PCR which is NAAT and is the confirmatory test. The antigen test is the rapid test and it gives you rapid results; however, if you want to be absolutely confirmed you would need to have the more exotic test. We are actually taking those numbers now and putting antigens with them and there are approximately 9,000 cases going on 10,000 cases in Lowndes County. There were 9,000 new infections reported in the State along with 435 new hospitalizations yesterday. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) statistics has shown that Georgia's rate has improved with regard to vaccination. In Lowndes County, antigen numbers were 3,000, VCR 5,479, total cases were 9,428, and 103 total deaths. After talking for several months about the vaccine being produced in the United States, they were told on Friday, December 11, 2020 to begin vaccinations on December 18, 2020. They had a one-week notice to actually start with the vaccinations. They offered the vaccine to all 240 health personnel who work in the South Health District. Initially, out of those 240, they had 40 people who received the vaccine and he was the first person vaccinated. They continued vaccinations through the end of December for Phase 1A and was informed on December 30, 2020 that they were going to expand vaccinations to Phase 1A Plus which was added by Governor Brian Kemp. This made tens of thousands in our District and thousands in our County who had not previously been eligible to receive the vaccination. They opened an on-line registration for a call back to set up an appointment. Three days later, they had 1,500 citizens signed up and hundreds more per day since then. They started Phase 1A vaccinations on Monday, January 18, 2021 and did 270 with 8 nurses on the first day. That averages about five minutes per nurse. The patient has to come in the front door, be registered, provide information on allergies, register at the front desk, get their consent form, get entered into the computer, go to the back, go through an educational process, receive the vaccination, and then go to the observation room for 15 to 20 minutes. They had 180 people on Tuesday, January 19, 2021. They are working as hard as they have ever worked, and they are doing a great job. After the first vaccination on December 18, 2020 and before the second Phase had opened up, he sent an E-mail to congratulate everyone involved because it was a huge success. He sent another E-mail on December 20, 2020 and asked them to be ready to go full steam ahead. They were making vaccines a priority. They talked about adding Saturday hours for vaccinations to get as many people vaccinated as soon as they could which is how we can get rid of COVID-19. The Phase 1A Plus included all health care personnel, emergency/medical management services, lab technicians, environmental services, long term care facilities, and they added law enforcement, fire personnel, dispatchers, 911 operators, adults 65 and older, and their caregivers. This added tens of thousands of potentially eligible people in our District with only a one-week notice. They will also go to Phase 1B in the near future which will add hundreds of thousands. These tiers are determined by the

CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). They have to enter the vaccination information into the GRIT System which is Georgia Registration Immunization Transactions and it is a somewhat antiquated computer system. The data is there and the Governor is going on the data that he is getting; however, the data is not getting into GRITS and it appears to the Governor that we are not vaccinating all the people that we should be. Part of that is a lack of communication and the fact that the GRITS data does not get to the CDC data and they are paying attention to the CDC data. As of January 12, 2021, we have vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine 40 people and the reason it is only 40 is that the Pfizer vaccine has to be kept at -70° Fahrenheit and our normal freezers go to 0° Fahrenheit or - 30° Centigrade. They did not have a local way of storing the Pfizer vaccine and they would have had to go to Tifton, transport it, and use the five doses within six hours. If they could not use it within that timeframe, it goes in the trash. The vaccine is such a precious commodity that the last thing they want to do is to throw it away. The logical aspects of all of this is so incredible they opted for the Moderna vaccine which has ten doses per vial and can be kept in a normal refrigerator at 0° Fahrenheit. They have been giving the Moderna vaccine since then and within the past 12 days, they have given almost 1,200 vaccinations. At the same time, there are other services going on at the local Health Department including family planning, testing for STD, HIV, TB, and immunizations for children attending kindergarten and school. The vaccine rollout in Georgia has been slow and at this point, Georgia is currently being shipped 120,000 COVID-19 vaccines each week with roughly one-third of that allotment being administered to nursing home residents. As of yesterday, they partnered with a local nursing home who was supposed to have been taken care of by a national chain; however, they had not heard from the national chain, so we loaned them our vaccines to give to the residents. We then have to give that information to the State so that all the numbers can add up. It is an incredible logistical and statistical task. That leaves 80,000 doses a week or fewer for the 1.3 million people 65 and older and the State of Georgia's 536 health care workers who were first in line to receive this. They are more Georgians that want the vaccine than can get it on any one day. Less than a third of the nearly 700,000 doses shipped to Georgia as of January 11, 2021 have been administered according to the State Department of Health data; however, there is an error in this data. There is an error in GRITS in getting this data to the State. We know that and they know that. There has been a wave of requests at the Health Department from people who are hoping to get the vaccine. They are getting hundreds and hundreds of phone calls daily in every Health Department and especially here in Valdosta. We have 120,000 citizens and 25% of those are over 65 years old so that is 25,000 to 30,000 people who are all of a sudden eligible for the vaccine. We are responding to that as much as we can. Our phones have been flooded and people could not get through; however, this week we have hired five to seven people just to answer phones and make appointments. They have had Staff who have repurposed themselves in the District Office and the Health Department who work in other areas but have stepped in to help make appointments and answer the phones. They are getting new phone lines installed and they have rented more space behind the South Health District Office from the Southern Georgia Regional Commission who moved recently to a new building. They will meet the demand and they are meeting the demand. They will continue this for as long as it takes. Expanding access to the COVID-19 vaccine is their priority and they are doing as much as they can.

Mayor Matheson stated that he wanted to ask the citizens of Valdosta and Lowndes County and throughout the South Health District to be patient as well. Dr. Grow and his Staff are fully committed, and their heart is in it in every way, shape, and form. They could not wait for the date to come and have the ability to administer to the citizens. They are doing the best job that anyone can do. Mayor Matheson stated that Dr. Grow had his second shot recently and asked him to comment on his experience. Dr. Grow stated that his arm was barely sore from either shot. He had one employee who got the second shot and had some fever this weekend; however, by Monday it had gone away. With closing in on administering 1,500 to 2,000 vaccines, they have yet to see a serious reaction in anyone.

Councilman Carroll stated that the numbers are amazing and when you hear that Dr. Grow's Staff processed 270 doses of vaccine this past Monday, it is hard to fathom on our end. Councilman Carroll inquired as to whether the citizens need to back off and give the Health Department a chance to catch up on those who have already called in. Dr. Grow stated that they had to shut the phones down on Friday so that they could catch up through the weekend. Courtney Sheeley, South Health District Director of Communications & Special Projects, stated that they have gotten it caught up all the way through January 5, 2021. One of the issues that they are running into is that a lot of people have given them incorrect phone numbers. Also, because there are so many people calling throughout the entire District, people are not recognizing the call back phone numbers so they do not answer it because they think it is Spam. They are also a lot of people who do not have voice mail set up. We are

putting out information on Social Media saying that if you registered and have not heard from the Health Department, citizens need to let them know via E-mail. They have given them an E-mail address and they are trying their best to catch up. Everybody is stepping up to help make these appointments and we will be starting a drive-thru vaccination site next Monday because of the demand and to get more people through. It will be the South Health District Staff who will be manning that because they want to leave the Health Department Staff manning the other site.

Mayor Matheson stated that South Georgia Medical Center (SGMC) is also offering drive-thru vaccinations and inquired as to whether we need private partnerships as well. Courtney Sheeley stated that they have a great relationship with SGMC so they were thrilled that SGMC could help take some of the burden off of the Health Department Staff. They are encouraging any large providers in town who have the ability and want to give the vaccine to enroll in getting the vaccine and help them out. This is a community partnership and it is not public health against the hospital or a private provider because they want people vaccinated. It is also important that they come back on time for the second dose. The more providers that they can get to help get the vaccine out then the quicker they can move through all of the communities and get people vaccinated.

Councilwoman Tooley inquired as to whether RNs, LPNs, and Medical Technicians would be allowed to administer the shots. Courtney Sheeley stated that all of those would be helping to administer the shots as well as some EMTs who came on board to help them with testing. They are also working with area Universities and getting student nurses who are able to come out and help as well. If anyone would like to volunteer to help in this endeavor, they can register on-line at "ServeGeorgia.gov". They could put them to work at the drive-thru to assist with observation and show people where to go. Councilwoman Tooley inquired as to whether a person who has already tested positive for the virus should go ahead and get vaccinated. Dr. Grow stated that it is recommended that they wait 90 days to get the vaccine. If they were asymptomatic, they can get tested for antibodies or they can go ahead and get the vaccine. If they were symptomatic and clearly had a case, the CDC recommends that they wait 90 days before they get the vaccine. It has not been studied in children and at this point the vaccine is not recommended for children. They are the least severely affected of all the groups and are not the highest risk group.

Councilwoman Vivian Miller-Cody stated that she had attended a virtual class with the Georgia Municipal Association yesterday and they were saying that Georgia was No. 10 in the red with the virus. Councilwoman Miller-Cody inquired as to where Lowndes County was at with the count. We have over 3,000 deaths a day due to COVID-19. Dr. Grow stated that as of this morning, the positivity rate was at approximately 16-17%. Two months ago, the number testing positive was 5%. Anything over 100 per 100,000 is considered high transmission. Today, we were 470 per 100,000. There were 93 patients in the hospital today. We are seeing the highest numbers of patients in the hospitals all over the State. We saw 1 person out of every 20 to test positive back during the summer and now we see 1 person out of every 5. Councilwoman Miller-Cody inquired as to how many cases we have in Lowndes County today. Dr. Grow stated that the most recent figures are 200 per day.

Councilwoman Tooley inquired as to whether the Health Department was still testing people every day. Dr. Grow stated that they were testing all day every day until they were mandated to give priority to vaccinations. They were given that directive on December 20, 2020; however, they still do specimen collection at the Health Department two days a week on Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. They have not stopped testing locally. There is a testing locator on the Georgia Department of Public Health website as well as a vaccine locator. There are commercial test centers available right now in Lowndes County; however, their priority right now is vaccinations.

Councilman Carroll stated that there is a large section of our population who are below poverty and it is not uncommon for the elderly to be cared for in-home and not in a nursing home. Councilman Carroll inquired as to whether there is some way to try to reach out to that segment of the population. Dr. Grow stated that for personal care homes with less than 25 residents, they are trying to come up with a mobile team who can go to them rather than them coming to us. With over 25 residents, the Federal government contracts with large corporate groups to do that.

Councilman Vickers stated that the largest number of senior citizens in our area live alone and many of them do not have access to technology. He called last week and was told he would get a call back, but he has not received a call. Yesterday he went on-line with someone and got registered for a vaccination on January 27, 2021.

He realizes that we were not prepared to do what we need to do, but we are going to have to have a large mass vaccination a lot faster than what we have now. He was not criticizing the Health Department, but we are really going to have to do a lot better. In order to be successful, you have to prepare to be successful. They have done the best they could under the circumstances, but we are really going to have to get on the ball if we are ever going to get this under control. Dr. Grow stated that the most they could do in one day with all the personnel they could provide is 800. If we get this up and going at the Civic Center, they can do 200 a day in one week. If you add another 100 or more at the Health Department, then that is 300 a day. Hopefully, caretakers can bring some of those people to the Civic Center. Dr. Grow stated that they do understand what Councilman Vickers is saying and they will continue to be addressing that.

Councilwoman Miller-Cody stated that she takes care of a 93-year-old person who cannot go out; however, there is a nurse who comes over to check on her weekly. Councilwoman Miller-Cody inquired as to whether those nurses are being trained to give vaccinations to elderly people. Dr. Grow stated that at the present time they have not been asked by home health agencies to be a partner. They have not reached out to them at the present time, but they would be glad to partner with anybody who is qualified. Courtney Sheeley stated that they would encourage them to become the provider because they already have nurses who can give the shots and they would not have to train them. The only difficulty would be that if there are three or four people who live in a home and they are getting the Moderna vaccine, they would have to ensure that they could give those ten doses within that period of time. The logistics of this vaccine is much more complex than just a regular flu vaccine. You have to know that you have so many people lined up at a time to give the vaccine to. They will be glad to reach out to them and encourage them to become a provider. One big thing that drives mass vaccination events is the vaccine availability. They receive allotments each week, but they are never promised an allotment. That is one of the reasons that they are now able to offer the drive-thru vaccinations. Councilman Vickers inquired as to whether they are expecting the Pfizer vaccine. Ms. Sheeley stated that right now they are just getting the Moderna vaccine and the amounts they are able to get does not last long because they give it out so quickly. It will start speeding up in the community now that the hospital is able to do their drive-thru. Councilwoman Miller-Cody inquired as to whether we could work with churches who have vans and transport people to the Civic Center. Ms. Sheeley stated that they could do that; however, but they would still need to have an appointment. Everything has to be appointment-driven because that is a directive from the State. Councilwoman Miller-Cody inquired as to whether the number of flu cases were up in Lowndes County. Dr. Grow stated that we are not the worst in the State with the number of flu cases. Ken Lowery, Epidemiologist with the South Health District, stated that we have an indicator that comes out every week which indicates the flu activity in our community and in the State. Last week it was 5 on a scale of 1 to 10 which is minimal. Councilwoman Miller-Cody inquired as to the cost for the vaccinations. Dr. Grow stated that the vaccinations are free.

Mayor Matheson stated that they are going to need more private partners to step forward to help with the vaccinations. He thanked Dr. Grow and his Staff for all that they are doing.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Matheson entertained a motion for adjournment.

A **MOTION** by Councilman Vickers, seconded by Councilman Carroll, was unanimously adopted (5-0) to adjourn the January 13, 2021 Special Called Meeting of the Valdosta City Council at 2:28 p.m. to meet again in Regular Session on Thursday, January 21, 2021.

City Clerk, City of Valdosta

Mayor, City of Valdosta