Editorial for Coastal Courier

COVID in Liberty County: A Reality Check

By: Ken Scharnagl

As we traverse this current COVID “reality” in which we find ourselves, I wanted to present some data analysis I have recently completed. As background, I am qualified to analyze data, as I have a master’s degree in Applied Mathematics from GSU and 15 years of teaching experience, both in secondary schools and in colleges. Secondly, I have resided in Liberty County since 1995, so this is my hometown. I have lived here, worked here, worshipped here, and raised my son here. I care about my town. Thirdly, although I am very passionate about my own personal political views, I will attempt in this article to speak only from an unbiased, mathematical-analytical point of view with respect to the data. I will, however, share some personal, non-partisan observations.

I have been increasingly concerned with the continuing level of “lockdown” we have had in Liberty County, from local parks to schools to local businesses. I have sensed a prevailing fear of the unknown as a result of this virus which has plagued our land. Fear of litigation has also overtaken logical decision-making in some cases. Fear of sickness has caused extreme changes in behavior, some for the good, of course. However, I have seen individuals driving alone in their vehicles with a mask on, walking in an open-air park with a mask on, working in their own back yards with a mask on, jogging down Highway 84 with a mask on. I feel *compelled* to provide some additional data insights to help our county carefully but knowledgeably make personal and corporate decisions. I do not discount the existence of the virus, as I have heard some describe it. That is foolishness; we know the virus exists. I do not find fault in those who have individual convictions to be extra cautious while in public; that is a personal decision and may also be affected by individual health concerns. However, I do not believe fear should prevail in this virus environment. That is what I fear the most --- people sacrificing the joy of living to the burden of fear. If we are innocently ignorant of facts, we simply cannot make wise, informed decisions, and we revert to a NO-mentality.

I reviewed the official data from <https://covid19.gachd.org>, which is the Georgia Department of Public Health for the Coastal Health District, which provides coronavirus resources for Georgia's Bryan, Camden, Chatham, Effingham, Glynn, Liberty, Long & McIntosh Counties. This is a very informative website, for which I am thankful. Using this data, I wanted to determine an estimate on how many “active” COVID cases exist in Liberty County on any given day. (Disclaimers: I have not yet extrapolated this analysis to the entire Coastal Health District. I understand Fort Stewart may not share their numbers, perhaps for national security purposes.)

I have heard people expressing increased anxiety about the cumulative number of cases in Liberty County going up. First, just because a cumulative number increases, it does not automatically imply that the virus is increasing in severity. For example, as of January 21, we lived through 21 calendar days. As of July 1, we lived through a cumulative number of about 180 calendar days. Again, consider population as example. If the population in a random town was 10,000 people, we expect that cumulative number to fluctuate daily based upon births and deaths, right? Cumulative means just that: an accumulation of individual data into an aggregate total. When someone fearfully complains that we have nearly 1000 cases in Liberty County, my thoughts go elsewhere. We have had nearly 1000 total cases since March 18, 2020. How many ACTIVE cases of COVID might be out there right now? Viruses do spread, and the accumulation of cases will go up (and actually never goes down, right?), but the infection of a virus in an individual does come to an end. A person is not perpetually COVID-sick. Perhaps 14-21 days after a diagnosis, we would expect that most people will fully recover (although sadly some have passed). My analysis simply uses the official data provided and then postulates estimated numbers of active cases, assuming that the current number increases with daily new cases but also DECREASES with daily recoveries (similar to the population example mentioned earlier). An analysis of the data from March 18 to August 31 reveals that we likely had between 125-203 active COVID cases in Liberty County as we began September 1, 2020. The 125 data point assumes recovery 14 days after diagnosis, while the 203 data point assumes recovery 21 days after diagnosis. Based upon our county’s population size, that is (thankfully) a very small number and a very, very small percentage. Our peak daily numbers ranged between 280-324 in late July. Thus, using the more realistic assumption of a 14-day recovery period, we have seen a 55% decrease in the number of active cases in Liberty County within about 1 month. All of this is very good news!

While the data analysis I provide is absolutely not a license to return to full normalcy, I *do* see it as a prescription for living life free from the shackles of fear and dread from COVID. So, I say to my fellow Liberty County citizens who may have over-quarantined themselves due to this fear, go outside! Enjoy the upcoming fall weather! Take your dog on a walk! Plant some flowers on your property! Go for a drive, even if you have no destination except to get out of the house and then eventually drive back home. Kids should take a break from their technology (other than schoolwork, of course) and go play outside, even if it is just in the back yard with their siblings. It is high time we start living again, not being captive to our fears, but living well-informed lives and making decisions safely and soundly. I trust that I have encouraged at least a handful of my fellow neighbors in this county today. Stay hopeful and prayerful for a physical vaccine cure soon. (On a more personal note, if you are interested in knowing about “The Cure” for a different kind of virus, that of sin, come see me at Grace Baptist Church.) Blessings!

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