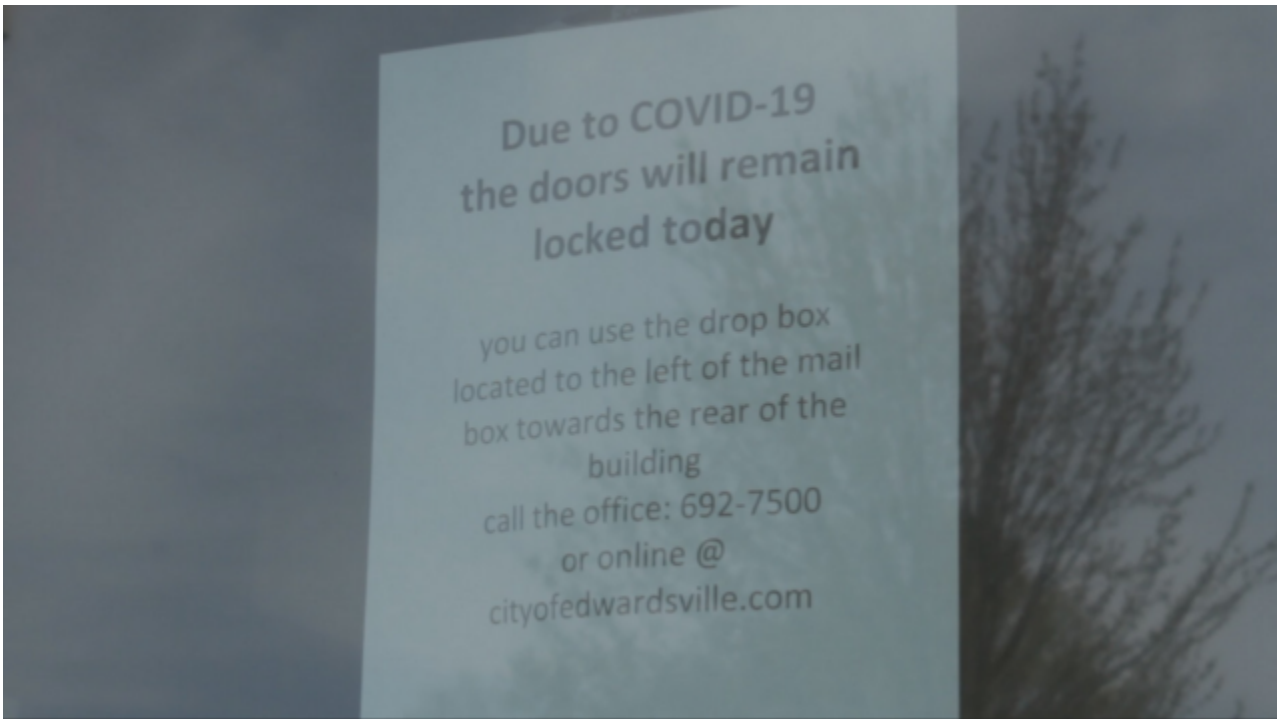


City Of Edwardsville Looks At Economic Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic, Tries To Maintain Sense Of Normalcy As Much As Possible

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - The economic impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic worldwide has had an immediate impact since the crisis began in late January, as economies have taken a very negative hit. In the United States alone, unemployment has hit record highs, many businesses have been forced to close temporarily, and protective

rules to help stop the spread of the virus, including stay-at-home orders, social distancing, etc., have become a new normal.

In the City of Edwardsville, business leaders are acknowledging the current problems, but are also offering help, advice and optimism in order to keep things going to as close as normal as possible.

"We're trying to maintain things as normal as possible," said city economic development director Walter Williams, "we are continuing to work our normal work hours, and I am reaching out to our small businesses to make sure they keep motivation and keep plodding through this process. We knew that the mandates were going to be difficult for our businesses, we understand the importance of flattening the curve. We are advising our businesses to take advantage of the resources that are available from the (Small Business Administration), from the Department of Commerce, as well as talk to their lenders, talk to their landlords to overcome the obstacles that are in front of them."

The restaurant business has also taken a major hit, but many of the restaurants have gone to both curbside pickups, carry-outs and delivery services in order to keep going during the pandemic.

"We've been tracking a lot of what goes on in Edwardsville," said Brett Stawar, the president and CEO of the Great Rivers and Routes Tourism Board, "and there are many closures, many disheartening things that are happening to our small business community. But we have been following, and actually recommending, curbside, carry-out and delivery options for all the Edwardsville restaurants that are still participating."

Tourism has also been impacted, but the board recently put out a guide to area attractions for local residents.

"We were able to get a spring guide delivered, and actually arrived in people's mailboxes this week," Stawar said. "And it celebrated a lot of the greatness that Edwardsville has to offer, and we have a special story of Year of the Woman with Chava's (Mexican Grill) and Lisa (Ybarra), who's the owner there. So a lot of our efforts there are really focusing on how we can bring Edwardsville back to life when this is over and this cloud has lifted."

Sporting events, which are also important to the city, have also been affected, with many events such as the Edwardsville Futures tennis tournament already been cancelled, and the tourism board is looking at ways to help salvage the summer season and looking ahead to the fall.

"We are going to see cancellations of tournaments happening here," Stawar said, "we have seen cancellations, things that we've worked very hard to bring to the city, and to bring together as a region collectively, that would help support our ways of life. Now those ways of life have been paused, and we'll have to wait until we see how can we maybe finish out some of the summer season, and then really start to look at the fall."

The Ed/Glen Chamber of Commerce is also fully functional during this time, and has moved many of their services online, but are still able to offer support and help to businesses that request and needs their assistance.

"We are fully functional, much like Walt mentioned," said Ed/Glen Chamber president and CEO Desiree Bennyhoff. "We are working offsite full time, so we are still fully staffed, and we are still fully serving the business community, we just have different scenery. So we are having regular staff meetings through Zoom, we have taken some of our programming online, so that we're still able to deliver programs and services, just in a different way than we might have if we were still occupying our office."

As soon as the crisis began, the Chamber began thinking about what the economic impact the pandemic would have on the business community, and how it could offer help to those businesses.

"We immediately started to think about the economic impact of the Coronavirus," Bennyhoff said, "and how is this going to affect our businesses, and how can we help them. And so, we immediately went into resource mode, and started identifying ways that we could be helpful. So we are great partners with the Illinois Chamber of Commerce. They work a lot with the (state Department of Commerce and Economic Development) and other state agencies, so we have been having weekly, and in some cases daily, phone calls with the Illinois Chamber of Commerce. We also work with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and they have been cranking out some really incredible resources from the federal level so that we can share that, and get it pushed out to our businesses."

A huge advantage to the city is that it's considered one the strongest market in the Metro-East area, and one of the strongest markets in the entire St. Louis area, and Bennyhoff expressed optimism that the market will bounce back stronger when the crisis ends.

"We are fortunate here in this market this is really the strongest market, strongest economy on the East Side of the St. Louis (market service area)," Bennyhoff said, "and for that, we are incredibly fortunate, and hope to come back and be thriving after this. What I really look forward to is getting our economy back up and running, getting our job creators back in their offices and places of business, and creating jobs. We really

need to get back to work, and we will be there for all of the businesses, and help them do exactly that, still remaining the trusted resource, working in partnership with the City of Edwardsville, and we want to see people back to work, and we want to see our businesses open. and we want to see people shopping and dining like they used to. So we definitely look forward to whatever the new normal is, but getting the economy back up and thriving is critically important for everyone."



