Unity detours into division

A few moments into the spread of the coronavirus, the Pinellas County Commission on Wednesday unanimously directed the county’s nearly 1 million residents to stay at home except for essential activity like trips for groceries, medical needs and jobs deemed essential.

The “stay at home” directive, which takes effect at 12:17 a.m. today and will last at least seven days, also permits residents to exercise outside as long as they keep 6 feet from others and avoid groups larger than 10 people.

The step was needed, county administrator Barry Burton said, because even after officials opened access to the county’s 35 miles of beaches Friday night, people still crowded boardwalks and hosted social gatherings. Burton said that social distancing could stop the virus.

“Our health professionals are tracking with us that it won’t be late,” Burton said.

“I don’t want the residents of Pinellas County and the Tampa Bay area to need to take this seriously,” Burton said.

The directive spurs three different categories of businesses that are considered essential and can remain open, including retail stores, utilities, distributors and constructors, with the agreement of service, health care providers, gas stations, restaurants serving only takeout and delivery, and long-term care facilities.

If approved today, Hillsborough’s rule would be in force for 24 hours on weekends.

Correction:

TAMPA — After a tumultuous Tuesday of confirming new cases daily, declaring a state of emergency and hurrying decisions, Mayor Jane Castor said Wednesday she had directed the county’s health department to work to draft a “safer-at-home” order to keep residents at home except when they are performing essential tasks, like getting groceries or getting medicine.

The order would be for a curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. Each weekday and 24 hours on weekends — although essential tasks can also be performed during those times. The plan groups made up of local city and county leaders, along with a new task force appointed this past Sunday, will address when to issue Hillsborough County’s safer-at-home order.

While the county commission came just hours after Pinellas County became the first in the Tampa Bay area to issue a “safer-at-home” rule.

Tampa Mayor Jane Castor had previously pushed for a stay-at-home order and on Tuesday, the mayor’s office issued an advisory warning telling residents to stay home and social distance.

Castor, however, said Wednesday that she had asked county officials to contact her after the county’s emergency manager tested positive for coronavirus.

“While she has not been symptomatic, the case is concerning,” Castor said.

The spread of coronavirus has caused society to re-evaluate what is considered an essential service, Walsh said.

A month ago, for instance, grocery workers were not widely thought as among the most important to help keep society going. Today, however, they are helping keep society going.

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BY FRANCISCO SERRANO

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Still, day care centers remain open and that creates a re- voir of potential infection,” said Jay Wellman, the senior associate dean for health policy and practice at the University of South Florida’s Morsani College of Medicine.

“We have Gov. Ron DeSantisrefused to close them? Because they are also considered essential during the pandemic,” Wellman said. “If we close day care, parents are forced to stay home from work, including physicians and nurses.”

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