Local Public Health Officials Close Developed Campgrounds

Public health officials in Lewis and Clark County today issued an order requiring developed public and private campgrounds in the county to close to recreational use.

The order listed two exceptions when campgrounds can stay open:

- Private developed campgrounds that are used for residential or sheltering purposes; and
- Non-developed campgrounds where proper social distancing practices are possible, including backcountry camping.

The local order goes above and beyond the governor’s recent directives, which did not close campgrounds. The order was issued by Drenda Niemann, Lewis and Clark County Health Officer, in conjunction with the City-County Board of Health. It takes effect Friday and runs through May 31.

“Camping in developed campgrounds raises a host of opportunities for the spread of COVID-19,” Niemann said. “Toilets, showers, picnic tables, RV hookups – those are all likely to be touched by many hands, leading to potential transmission. Social distancing may be difficult. While we agree with the governor that people should get outside and enjoy fresh air and exercise, we believe there are ways to do so that don’t involve as much risk.”

Niemann said the health department may extend the order or cut it short, depending on the course of the disease in the county over the next several weeks.

State law (50-2-118 MCA) allows a local health officer to “take steps to limit contact between people in order to protect the public health from imminent threats, including but not limited to ordering the closure of buildings or facilities where people congregate and cancelling events.”

A local health officer can require tighter restrictions than those issued by the governor but may not loosen state restrictions.

Many developed campgrounds – including those operated by the USDA Forest Service, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, and U.S. Bureau of Land Management – have already closed at least partially.
“We continue to see and hear about people congregating,” Niemann said, “and that worries us. We know it’s tough staying home and social distancing, but if we don’t stay the course, we could end up going through this all over again.”

Anyone with a complaint about group gatherings or non-essential businesses remaining open may call the health department at 457-8900.