



Press Release

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Conducting business differently is working for Washington County

JONESBOROUGH – When the decision was made to close the Historic Courthouse in Jonesborough to the public, elected officials with offices inside the building didn't quite know what to expect.

The new way of doing business, whether it be online or via drop boxes and traditional mail, enabled the county to keep the wheels of government moving.

"Everything is going extremely well," said Mayor Joe Grandy. "We brought in a security guard to handle the front door at the Historic Courthouse, drop boxes for contractors and the courts have payment boxes in the George Jaynes Justice Center."

In the Historic Courthouse, both the County Clerk and Register of Deeds offices are seeing an increase in mail. In one day, the Clerk's office issued more than 200 vehicle renewals that were submitted online.

"We were not expecting the tag renewals to be this significant considering Governor Bill Lee extended the expiration date on tags that expire in March, April and May to June 15," said County Clerk Kathy Storey. "Our local car dealers are keeping us busy as well with an increased number of new vehicle registrations."

The only thing that has declined in the Clerk's office is the number of marriage licenses. Governor Lee also suspended the expiration of marriage licenses issued after March 12, so that those delaying their weddings because of COVID-19 do not need to pay for a new license.

Down the hall at the Register of Deed's office, FedEx envelopes are pouring in as closings on homes and property march on.

"The amount of mail and overnight envelopes has definitely increased," said Register of Deeds Teresa Bowman. "Families are buying homes and we're recording all the information, so that part of our office is operating as usual."

The recording of discharge papers for veterans, which is free, can still be accomplished. However, veterans wanting an identification card, which is tied to the office's Thank a Vet program, will have to wait until the office reopens to the public.

The County's Planning and Zoning office utilizes both a drop box and an online system to keep economic development moving in the county.

"Basically, nothing has changed," said Planning Director Angie Charles. "We are still providing the same level of service as before."

To accommodate the issuing of building permits and the scheduling of inspections, the office fast-tracked the activation of an online module to its current software. Beginning at the end of March, contractors could login to a portal to apply for permits and schedule inspections for projects.

“All of our builders and developers have been cooperative and understanding during this transition,” said Building Official Scott Chapman. “Our goal is to keep development moving in the county, especially as we enter our peak building season.”

The Governor’s executive orders allowed the Washington County Regional Planning Commission to meet electronically to approve planning and land use related items.

The only thing that has dwindled are permits for individual homeowners for improvement or additions of accessory structures.

The Trustee’s Office would normally spend this time in April assisting elderly homeowners in applying for property tax relief. The Governor extended that April deadline to July 1.

For those individuals wanting to pay their 2019 taxes, or make pre-payments on 2020, you can do so by dropping a check off at the courthouse, mailing a check to the Trustee’s Office at PO Box 215, Jonesborough, TN 37659 or online via a link on the county’s website (washingtoncountyttn.org). Fees do apply if you use the online option.

At the Justice Center, things have slowed considerably in the courtroom since Chief Justice Jeffery S. Bivins closed the courts to all in-person proceedings on March 13 and extended the order to April 30.

“Per the order, the only proceedings are those necessary to protect the constitutional rights of defendants, including bond-related matters and plea agreements,” said Circuit Court Clerk Brenda Downes. “We are limiting the number of individuals who must be in courtrooms. Only essential participants are allowed in.”

First appearances in both Sessions and Criminal Court are still occurring, as are preliminary hearings in Sessions Court. New court dates are being set for any other appearances. Orders of protection and any essential filings are still processed at the Clerk’s window. Court fees and fines are collected online, via the mail and a drop box at the Justice Center.

In Chancery Court, Clerk and Master Sarah Lawson said even in suppressed status, cases requiring the Chancellor John Rambo’s attention are handled via electronic means or in chambers with a limited number of individuals present. In addition, all filing fees for fax or electronic submissions were waived by the Chancellor for the duration of the order.

The order to close the Justice Center to nonessential traffic also impacted the Veteran Service Office, which assists veterans in accessing benefits and services. Jerry Story, Veterans Service Officer, continues to work with the county’s veterans to make sure they gain access to the benefits they deserve. Veterans are asked to call Story at 753-1628 to make an appointment. In the past family members were allowed to come back with veterans for meetings. Now, only one person is allowed into the VSO office at a time.

“Once we are ready to open up the county buildings for in-person services again, we hope that folks won’t soon forget how county offices adapted to keep the wheels of government turning,” Grandy said.