

## Coronavirus worries York Water District as seasonal residents eye return

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YORK, Maine — As the town and the state have worked to limit the movement of people in response to the coronavirus pandemic, shuttering hotels, short-term rentals, campgrounds and public property, a question has arisen about those who are returning to their York homes after the winter or who have a summer place here: Shouldn't they remain where they are now?

The question has been constantly on the mind of York Water District superintendent Don Neumann these days. The YWD is in the thick of this discussion, as it is responsible for turning on water for seasonal and summer homes.

The first thing Neumann said he'd like residents of all stripes to know is that the water district is governed by the Maine Public Utilities Commission, which has strict rules regarding when water must be made available to places that do not have it year-round.

Neumann also wants people to know that he is keenly aware of the language in the selectmen's emergency proclamation passed last Thursday. It states "in the strongest possible terms" that the town recommends people remain in their primary residence or the place they currently reside until at least the end of April, or longer if Gov. Janet Mills extends her own emergency stay-at-home order.

But, as Town Manager Steve Burns and Neumann agree, private property differs notably from public spaces like beaches or transient places like short-term rentals or motels.

"Someone has paid a lot of money for a summer home," Burns said. "How can you tell them they can't come here?"

Some full-time residents have urged town leaders to consider leaving the water turned off for part-time residents for the time being. That way, fewer people would come into York in the near future. But flatly refusing to turn the water on would be illegal, Burns said.

"They have to turn those lines on, by law," Burns said during Monday night's Board of Selectmen meeting.

York Water District is dealing with two different types of part-time residents: the seasonal resident and the summer line resident. A different set of PUC rules applies to each type.

### Seasonal residents

The YWD services 416 seasonal customers, defined as houses that are connected to the same deep water main as year-round residences but whose owners choose to be seasonal. A good example are people who winter elsewhere and often return to York about this time of year.

By PUC rules, Neumann said, these customers call the water district to say they are headed home and want water turned on. In these instances, the PUC requires the YWD to fulfill the request within 48 hours. However, the PUC recently issued a waiver in light of the coronavirus that could modify that mandate.

The waiver, requested by Maine Water Company, allows water utilities to screen seasonal customers to determine whether anyone in the returning household has recently traveled to high-risk areas, has been told they have or are suspected of having COVID-19, or has a family member experiencing symptoms of the virus.

If the answer to any of the questions is "yes," then YWD staff will not be allowed to enter the home to install the meter, which will have to be handled by the homeowner or a plumber.

Since the selectmen's order came out, when seasonal customers call to have their water turned on, Neumann said the YWD has recommended that they wait until May 1.

“Most people have said they would honor it. Some have steadfast plans, and they’re coming regardless,” he said. “But for the most part, they understand what the ultimate goal is. We haven’t had a whole lot of pushback.”

### **Summer lines**

The YWD also maintains 17 miles of summer lines, which are lines on top of the ground or buried no more than a foot and which strictly service summer-only residences, such as those on the Nubble, streets off of Ridge Road, and parts of Shore Road and Western Point.

In a typical season, YWD workers would have the lines cleaned and ready for use by the day after Patriots’ Day. This year, that would be April 21. But the PUC doesn’t require summer lines to be ready until May 1, so the water district is taking advantage of that extra time.

Neumann said he already has two employees in self-quarantine due to their recent travels.

“My concern is if we send a crew into the field, and they contract the virus, we could be in deep trouble,” he said.

Neumann said he would appreciate if the May 1 deadline could be extended but has been told by state officials that “local utilities cannot use COVID-19 as a reason for not turning on service.”

On the one hand, the pandemic seems to be getting worse every day, with estimates suggesting it could peak about April 21, he said. On the other hand, he said, “water is an essential service.”

“That’s the tricky part,” he added. “Our job is to serve when requested. We treat all our customers the same.”

Gov. Mills’ press secretary Lindsay Crete said water utilities “should not deny access to water.” But she also stressed that an executive order Mills issued last Friday requires travelers coming into the state, regardless of their state of residency, to self-quarantine for 14 days and take other precautions.

“This is painful for everyone,” Neumann said. “But we’re bound by state rules and regulations. So unless we get an executive order telling us not to turn on the summer lines — and I don’t think that will happen — we have to have them ready by May 1.”

*Steven Porter contributed to this report.*

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