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Austin Top News – May 18, 2020

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Photo by Roschetzky Photography

Governor Greg Abbott will make another announcement today about his plan to get more businesses opened up. Bars and nightclubs are anxiously awaiting that announcement in hopes that they may actually be included. Some bars here in Austin did a soft opening Friday where no customers were allowed. Employees were able to get a feel for some of the changes that may be coming.

Texas gyms today will begin testing the waters and start opening at 25% capacity. For places like Gold's Gym in Cedar Park, that means 173 people inside at any given time. District manager Leonard Rouse tells CBS Austin they have taken a lot of precautions, including in the locker room.

"We have roped off and chained off entrances into lockers, as well as zip tied all the lockers," says Rouse.

Gyms will also have to maintain strict social distancing and frequently sanitize.

Reducing liability related to COVID-19 is something a lot of business owners are turning their attention to. During an Austin Chamber of Commerce webinar, attorney Pam Madere says it's important to create a liability plan covering all the bases.

"Some of the lawsuits that we've already seen nationally so far are related to failure to properly screen employees for COVID-19, failure to protect employees from other people," Madere says.

That plan should evolve along with CDC regulations, and she also recommends getting advice from an employment lawyer.

Several Austin retailers are still keeping their doors closed even with the go-ahead from the governor. Among them is local toy and candy chain, Toy Joy. Manager Austin Boulter says their sales are still hurting due to a drop in tourism and lack of spending. They had to let go of all but their senior staff to survive and have since shifted their sales focus to the digital side. Even with the governor easing restrictions, Boulter says sales are still struggling.

"We're obviously nowhere near our normal numbers; but for having put this together so quickly I think we're doing all right."

Boulter says sales need to return, not just their ability to see more customers in person.

Austin health officials have concluded that COVID-19 was around earlier than they realized. Mayor Steve Adler says central health and community care clinics will ramp up testing in hopes of spotting cases that are still flying under the radar.

"We're going to start giving an asymptomatic test to anybody that shows up to one of their clinics."

Based on numerous interviews, Austin Public Health now believes the first case was found on March 2nd; 11 days earlier than the first official diagnosis.

No new coronavirus deaths have been reported in Travis County, but 34 new cases have been added to the overall tally. Austin Public Health now reports 2,459 cases, 77 deaths and 892 recoveries. Hospitalizations are currently at 89.

Two of Concordia University's residence halls are now being used to house healthcare workers and first responders. Vice President of External Affairs Beth Atherton tells FOX 7 it's not a quarantine, but it is a place for them to self isolate.

"Healthy people want to stay healthy and we want to keep their families healthy," Atherton says.

More than 100 beds are available for self isolation during the pandemic.

Five Williamson County EMS employees are under quarantine after testing positive for COVID-19. Officials say they actually went into quarantine before the results came back, and they've had no contact with the public. Around 20 other EMS employees are quarantined who have not been tested nor shown any symptoms.

Williamson County's total case count is now 481; 261 are recoveries. Officials say 16 are currently hospitalized and 19 have died since the outbreak began.

The owner of Marble Falls iconic Blue Bonnet Cafe has died. John Kemper's family says he passed away due to complications with Parkinson's disease. Kemper bought that cafe back in 1981. His service will not be public because of COVID-19 but the family is planning a memorial for later on in the year.

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