

The following comments were from City Manager Rhoden to the City Commissioners on Oct. 13th 2020:

City Manager Rhoden informed the City Commission that staff have had numerous discussions recently regarding the Christmas parade. He stated there are a lot of people looking forward to it, and a lot of people not looking forward to it with the current COVID-19 gravity of the COVID-19 crisis in our country right now. City staff have had conversations with the Sheriff's Department, and they are willing to support us if we put the parade and day event on; if we felt we didn't want to do it they understood. On Tuesday, October 13th City Manager Phil Rhoden, Assistant City Manager Mike Griffis, and Fire Chief Scott Crews had a conference call with the Health Department staff and were given data/information, once again being very supportive. They sent us the newest CDC guidelines and one of the high risk factors that they consider is community parades. You cannot control the number of people there and you cannot control social distancing. It would be impossible, even if we passed a mandate on masks being required, for the Sheriff's Department to enforce that – there's just no way to do it. It's pretty much I think from what you see on social media and what you hear in general conversation, that about 50% of the community wants it and about 50% do not. So either way people are going to be upset with us and I told staff what my rationale was on this. If we do have the parade half the people are going to be mad and we have put people at risk. If we do not have the parade half the people are going to be mad but we didn't put anyone at risk. We asked if there was any current trend (uptrend, decrease, level) on the number of positive tests and it is all over the page. We are seeing this around the country where you see spikes in different areas and in different age groups. Yes, we have 45 days left, but we cannot wait that long to make the decision. This is a big undertaking for our fire department to put this together, the vendors have to buy supplies, and all that has to be done in advance, so it's just time to make this decision. I wish we could wait longer and maybe see a downturn in the number of people affected, but the right thing to do is to make a decision. We have made the decision to cancel the parade. I hate doing this and it hurts me to do it; it hurts Chief Crews and Assistant Manager Griffis when we made this decision today. This is the showcase event of the year for the City of Macclenny and Macclenny Fire and Rescue Department. We love doing it, but there again you are looking at in excess of 15,000 people coming into the community and there's just no way to do it. We talked about it and some communities have already cancelled their parades; some are trying to put social distance circles out where you have to stay within that circle, but that's not feasible for this small town where we hold the parade. We just don't see any way to do it and do it safely and feel comfortable in doing that. I think we have an obligation to keep the community as safe as we can and I don't see any way to come to any other decision but to not hold it this year.

I will say there's going to be some comparisons put out there, well you're having a homecoming parade. The school has made the decision to do that, and I support Superintendent Raulerson's decision to do that. It's a different number of people, and you can social distance. You are probably talking about 1,500 to 2,000 people spread out along US 90. You can spread those out

but you cannot spread out 15,000 people and still do that. The seniors that are involved in the homecoming parade, they are only a senior one time. You only get to be on the homecoming court one time, those senior football players, band members, the floats, you get one chance in your life to do that and they have missed so much. I had a conversation with the Superintendent on this, and once again I don't want this to come back negative on her because she is doing it, and some people are going to say "well they could do that." I support what she is doing but I still think for us it is two different types of events and the length of the event is another big factor. CDC talks about that time that you are in a space and the homecoming parade will be primarily attended by local people and lasts an average of 20 minutes. We have individuals from many surrounding communities that come to this so there's so much more opportunity for people who have been in different environments and different exposures, along with this parade lasting sometimes up to 2 hours. The vendor booths day event will not be done either. The whole event will be cancelled, as we just cannot ensure social distancing and that proper safety precautions will be taken. It's just too large of an undertaking and too many people involved. I hate it for our church community that really supports the Christmas parade. They are here and they present what Christmas is all about, not the materialistic side, but why we are here and the birth of our Christ. Anytime you cancel an event like that the decision doesn't come easily and I don't take it lightly. It's the right thing to do.

We know this is going to hurt some of the businesses, especially downtown business people. If we can get this virus under control maybe we can come back with a springtime event or something that we have never done to try and help the community out and celebrate the blessed place we live in. On it's worst day, it is still better than any place I've ever been.