

GREENFIELD/MONTAGUE/ORANGE



STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

The skate park and playground at Unity Park in Turners Falls have been closed by the town to encourage social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

‘We want to save lives’

To help slow spread of COVID-19, communities restrict park access

By **MAX MARCUS**
Staff Writer

Public parks are being closed off or partially restricted as towns review policies in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Restrictions so far have tended to focus on structures where people crowd together, such as playgrounds and sports facilities. Open spaces and nature trails, where people can better keep their distance, generally have not been restricted.

Greenfield, Montague and Orange all had announced partial closures of their public recreation facilities by Wednesday. Montague’s decision was Monday night, in a meeting with the Board of Health and Selectboard. Orange and Greenfield both made decisions Tuesday.

“To me, it’s inconsequential whether other towns have done such a move or not,” said Montague Health Director Gina McNeely. “This is an extremely serious issue. I would not mind at all being the leader on it.”

Greenfield and Montague both have closed playgrounds and structures that tend to draw people into clusters, but have left open larger open spaces. Orange closed all of its parks.

Specifically, Greenfield closed its tennis courts, basketball courts, pickleball court, pavilions and Paws Park. Montague also closed the playground and skate park at Unity Park.

All restrictions remain un-



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til further notice. The public health problem with recreation facilities, McNeely said, is not necessarily the solid surfaces that multiple people touch, but the tendency for clusters of people to be drawn together.

Scientific information is not totally established on how long the coronavirus may be able to survive on surfaces like plastic and metal, McNeely said. What is for certain, she said, is that the virus is most often transmitted by social contact.

Lately, as fear of the coronavirus has increased, the



Montague Health Department has received several phone calls from residents who had noticed large groups at the playgrounds and at the skate park, McNeely said.

“I hate to even put those words together, that there’s a problem with people congregating at the skate park. That’s what we want. That’s why we built it,” McNeely noted. “But the inherent problem with that is the proximity. That’s what we know unequivocally.” Trails and other parks are still open. Greenfield Recre-

ation Director Christy Moore, in a memo announcing the new closures, mentioned that spending as little as 20 minutes a day outside can noticeably lower stress and can improve immunity and cardiovascular health. McNeely mentioned the Montague Plains Wildlife Management Area can be a good place to get fresh air.

“We all want to see kids run and play and swing,” McNeely said. “But right now we want to save lives.”

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