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BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

April 29, 2020

Honorable Governor Steve Sisolak
Grant Sawyer Office Building
555 East Washington Ave, Suite 5100
Las Vegas, Nevada 89101

Re: Plan for Reopening of Douglas County Businesses

Governor Sisolak,

Douglas County recognizes the difficult decisions you have made to reduce the impact of COVID-19 in Nevada. We appreciate your attention to the public health and safety of our citizens.

Douglas County seeks your support for a phased approach to recovery that recognizes the geographic and social diversity of Nevada. Rural counties present our own unique challenges and opportunities in this crisis. A one size fits all solution for Nevada is unworkable. Recovery decisions should be based on specific data and on a county-by-county or a regional basis. We request that you follow your original timeline to reopen Nevada on May 1, 2020. If not for all of Nevada, then at least for the rural counties where there have either been zero reported cases (Storey County) or a rate of less than .0002% (Douglas County).

Douglas County stands ready to lead in this recovery process. This letter outlines a summary of our planning efforts to reopen Douglas County for business with a safe and phased approach in conformance with guidelines from the White House, the CDC, OSHA and the State of Nevada. In the absence of a clear state framework, Douglas County is working on a comprehensive recovery plan.

The economic impact of your directives are devastating the economy of Douglas County along with the rest of Nevada. According to your Office of Economic Development, between 21.5% and 24.1% of Douglas County businesses are closed. This does not include the many businesses that are allowed to be open under your Emergency Directives but have been forced to lay off many employees due to the slowdown of business occasioned by your Directives. This is having devastating impacts on Nevada families. The Douglas County Sheriff's Office is reporting significant increases in calls for domestic violence and mental health issues, including suicides. Your directives are taking a heavier toll on Douglas County's citizens than COVID-19. Something has to change soon.

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 218, Minden, NV 89423

Douglas County is not requesting a full return to normal business operations at this time. We recognize the serious public health emergency caused by COVID-19 and public health data should inform decision-making. What we do request is that you no longer take state-wide emergency actions based on aggregate public health data but, instead, tailor your actions based on actual regional health data. Based on the data that is available to you, we request that you consider a partial reopening of businesses defined as “non-essential” by your Emergency Directive 003 and subsequent regulations. A partial reopening of these businesses would provide a lifeline to many small businesses and the families they support.

Douglas County has been working with our business community throughout this crisis. First with guidance and an educational effort to explain your Directives, then with coordinating relief efforts, and now with planning for the re-opening of our local businesses. We have encouraged businesses to develop their own individual plans to re-open within state and federal guidelines, primarily with reference to the guidelines issued by the CDC and OSHA.

“Non-essential” retailers should be permitted to reopen on the same basis as “essential retailers,” in compliance with CDC guidelines. The notion of “essential” vs. “non-essential” should be abandoned in favor of model tied directly to a business’ compliance with CDC and OSHA guidelines, regardless of what they are selling. Your anticipated decision to allow non-essential businesses to provide retail sales on a curbside or home delivery basis is a significant step in the right direction.

Once retailers have been addressed, consideration should be given for restaurants and other food and beverage establishments to have on-site consumption in outdoor areas or with limited indoor capacity based on CDC guidelines for social distancing, using a fraction of current occupancy limits as a guide.

The State should then consider allowing hair salons and barbershops to re-open under strict guidelines. The various State occupational boards exist to ensure the health and safety of the public. This industry’s business model is predicated on strong cleaning and hygiene protocols. We urge you to task the occupational boards to recommend standards for these businesses, based on CDC guidelines. Other states have already successfully done so.

Outdoor recreation opportunities need to be re-opened as well. Thank you for reconsidering your ban on golf, tennis and pickleball activities. However, the continued closure of park amenities should be re-considered. For example, boating and fishing activities naturally induce social distancing practices. Businesses that do not follow guidelines should be addressed on a case-by-case basis instead of closing entire industries.

We also call upon you to use your authority under NRS chapter 414 to suspend NRS 608.060, requiring private businesses to make payroll twice per month. In these extraordinary times, this law is forcing more businesses to lay off more people and force more businesses to close when temporary cash flow issues make compliance with this law unattainable.

Lastly but equally important is the status of our houses of worship. Action should swiftly be taken to modify your Emergency Directive regarding houses of worship. It was a bitter blow to many people of faith when you banned in-person religious services only days before Easter Sunday, despite many of our clergy putting thoughtful plans in place for social distancing to protect the public. Although well intended from a public health perspective, this caused many legitimate concerns about the role of the State over religion. In these trying times, our people need the support of their faith communities more than ever.

All of this should be done cautiously, within CDC guidelines, and in compliance with strong public health criteria. Douglas County is part of the Quad County Emergency Operations Center (EOC), unified with Carson City, Lyon County, and Storey County. Through Carson City Health and Human Services, we have a strong monitoring and testing program. Next week all four counties will be conducting asymptomatic testing of a portion of our general populations. This is an important step forward in the critically needed expansion of testing. Our healthcare facilities are not currently overburdened.

Douglas County currently has nine active cases out of a population of nearly 50,000. We as elected officials and our citizens have heeded your directives. In coordination with the Quad County EOC, we have pushed out a continuous flow of information through press releases and social media posts to remind people of social distancing protocols, to ask their patience, to divert their frustrations and give them hope for better days ahead. All of this is demonstrated by our low number of infections. Our people can be trusted to do the right thing, with a little guidance and leadership. We are ready for recovery and request your assistance to help our citizens.

Douglas County Board of Commissioners

By: William B. Penzel
William B. Penzel, Chairman

By: Larry Walsh
Larry Walsh, Vice Chairman

By: Dave Nelson
Dave Nelson, Commissioner

By: John Engels
John Engels, Commissioner

By: Wesley Rice
Wesley Rice, Commissioner