

Paul L Evans
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
DISTRICT 20



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

May 14, 2020

The Honorable Mike Ainsworth, Polk County Commissioner
The Honorable Lyle Mordhorst, Polk County Commissioner
The Honorable Craig Pope, Polk County Commissioner
Polk County Courthouse
850 S. Main Street
Dallas, Oregon 97338

Polk County Commissioners:

I write this letter in response to your ongoing efforts to “reopen” our community. After reviewing the draft plan submitted to the Governor of Oregon, and listening to the press briefing outlining the areas for continued refinement of contagion tracing and tracking, and listening to a diverse group of local leaders – I respectfully request an opportunity to expand the scale, scope, and size of the workgroup involved with improving the plan.

The important questions associated with contact tracing and tracking involve a wide range of concerns: 1) how do we build sufficient capacity for the testing necessary to know how – and where – the contagion is spreading? 2) how do we leverage the temporary assistance that the Oregon Health Authority is providing for a sustainable period of time? 3) how do we provide oversight for businesses and other group activities once we are approved for a “reopening?” and 4) how do we adjust our efforts should the contagion return in a significant way?

These are not merely academic questions – they go to the heart of the methodology of reopening. While we all share the desire to reopen the full spectrum of our economic activities, we must do so thoughtfully or risk a secondary and/or tertiary wave potentially more impactful than this initial experience has been. I want to emphasize that we are in this together: I share much of the frustration that so many do with the ongoing response programming. So long as I live, I will never fully understand the logic behind some of the choices made at the federal and state level during this contagion. There has been far more ambiguity than necessary – far too many “squishy” answers.

For good or ill, there will be plenty of time for assessing the past after this threat is contained. In the meantime, we must focus upon seeking out the best information available, developing a comprehensive plan that reflects a diversity of perspectives, and implementing a plan that provides us with the capacities of returning to the new “normal” through a methodology that allows for targeted adjustment if/when necessary. We must find common ground and utilize the authorities at our disposal for the public good, especially when – the public is anxious and restless. This pause provides all of us with an opportunity for reflection as well as expanded outreach.

Like all of you, I have paid close attention to this emergent threat since the beginning of the year. Watching this contagion migrate across the planet has been challenging. As the chair of the Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness for the Oregon House of Representatives, a member of the Oregon Homeland Security Council, and the Joint Special Committee on the Coronavirus Response (for the Oregon House of Representatives), I am keenly aware of the delayed federal response that has stymied local and regional emergency structures and systems. We find ourselves in a crisis of a magnitude that didn’t have to be. Instead of taking concrete steps early enough to contain the contagion, we allowed for a dual crisis: an economic as well as health disaster of historic proportions.

I write this letter today in the hopes that we can rally around what we have in common. We all know that independently-owned businesses and working families are struggling to navigate this crisis. Independently-owned businesses and working families are struggling. Our neighbors have invested their fortunes into small businesses; they suffer each; every day, they are not allowed to operate at full capacity. Working families, who are already struggling to pay the bills, are forced to choose between doing the essential work we need and exposing themselves to potential infection or staying at home knowing that at some point the bills will come due.

Polk County is different than other places. Our nearly ninety thousand residents are not statistics: they are our family, friends, and neighbors. We are all in this together; we are all impacted whenever any of our community face calamity. It is precisely because of this interconnectedness that I urge a reconsideration of the plan. We have a larger than average population of people who are at higher risk for contagion: aging people and all who have been denied access to available healthcare – the folks at the lower ends of the socioeconomic spectrum – the folks who are working most of the essential jobs are at significant risk. We must take tracing and tracking far more seriously, but we must also lead the way in implementing a more forward-thinking strategy.

Today we face an economic calamity because of our inability to draw clear margins around the disease. It is time to put the horse before the cart. The recent outbreak in Polk County demonstrates the volatility of “hot spots” because of the complex variables in play. Therefore, we must address the subject most people would prefer to ignore: the need for a robust public safety campaign that puts safety protocols in place before any significant reopening of our economy. This includes but is not limited to enforcement of social distancing standards: it is time to implement a mandatory requirement for wearing appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for all people “in public” on a statewide basis. It is time to limit the number of variables in the larger equation.

In circumstances like these, mandatory PPE is primarily for the protection of others, not the wearer. At present, there is no viable enforcement of the statewide recommendations made regarding PPE. This is something important enough – controversial enough – that warrants a community dialogue prior to implementing any change to the existing safety measures. Oregonians rightly expect to exercise our liberties. And yet, to live in a community is a choice to accept voluntary constraints on liberties; we are responsible for ensuring our actions do not cause lasting harm for others. This is especially true when a clear and present danger to the community exists – and contagion by definition – is a clear and present danger to all.

In closing, I ask that when/if your draft plan is returned to you for reconsideration that you expand the conversation to include local and regional leaders. Many of us had hoped to be more involved in the draft plan you previously submitted. As you know, outreach and transparency are critical elements when seeking investment in a successful plan of action. The Governor has provided us with added time for expanded dialogue – I ask that we seize upon this opportunity – that we resubmit a plan we are all prepared to support. We all share a desire to reopen Oregon, we all share in the rewards as well as the risks involved in getting this plan right. And we would all benefit from a transparent dialogue that yields a plan based upon personal responsibility, data-driven measurements, and sound reasoning. For my part, I offer any assistance you might ask for.

Respectfully,



Paul L. Evans

CC: Nik Blosser, Chief of Staff
Elana Pirtle-Guiney, Legislative Director, Governor Kate Brown’s Office
John McArdle, Mayor of Independence
Cec Koontz, Mayor of Monmouth
Chuck Bennett, Mayor of Salem