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9 A.M.-4:30 P.M.



House of Representatives

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Harrisburg

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The Honorable Tom Wolf
238 Main Capitol
Harrisburg, PA 17120

April 23, 2020

Dear Governor Wolf,

During an unprecedented time of devastating crisis in our commonwealth, you and your team have been tasked with guiding Pennsylvanians through traumatic and distressing circumstances.

As we all recognize, the hardships felt by many individuals, families and communities are increasing public pressure for putting people back to work. Many believe that ours is not an all-or-nothing choice between health and economy. Rather, they are looking to state and local leaders to figure out how to increase the pool of people who are working in essential jobs, rather than adding to the unemployment rolls.

However, I must protest in the strongest of terms that this regional approach is not fair to the people of the 80th District.

As part of the Southcentral regional Community Healthcare System, the 80th District represents the lowest amount of cases with between two and eight cases, along with zero deaths. I join with my constituents to demand a different approach to allow for the people of this district to reopen businesses and services immediately. Our work here by the people of my district in following your directives and those of the Health Secretary Levine has been exemplary. My constituents have every reason to demand a different approach that is fair, not arbitrary and punitive, to the people who have followed all guidelines for safety.

As we pivot toward a safe return to our work life, with and without the presence of COVID-19, I urge you to allow the residents of Blair County and the 80th District to open immediately.

In formulating your "Red-Yellow-Green" guidelines, it positions the residents of the 80th District to a safe and strategic reopen. We are and have been ready for this for weeks.

Here is what we have done and are doing:

Through the work of our economic development teams, we have formed a "recovery taskforce." This panel includes relevant state, county and municipal leaders and entities to provide needed guidance. These are experienced and reliable people who are not just looking to sidestep prudent medical directives.

Our healthcare landscape includes UPMC Altoona, Nason Hospital and Tyrone Hospital for support to prepare for any resurgence of the virus during our phased reopening. Our hospitals would also be perfectly positioned as

“satellite” testing locations following the same testing procedures as those you are preparing in the southeast and northeast corners of the state. There are reports that major medical facilities are preparing layoffs. It is hard to imagine that in the midst of pandemic medical care professionals and workers would be added to the already overburdened unemployment compensation system, but every step taken comes with unintended consequences attached.

Our caseload of virus positive tests and deaths is among the lowest in the state. This would seem to indicate that the risk factors for a staged start-up are relatively low. At the same time, if there were to be an increase in cases necessitating a pullback, the consequences are unlikely to be catastrophic.

The ability of our region to provide a safe return to economic life is underscored by physical layout and public commitment to safety. Almost exclusively rural and agricultural, the businesses and workplaces in this region are more scattered. In addition, our residents have conscientiously and responsibly abided by the safety measures your office and the office of Health Secretary Levine have directed.

While we are thankful that our medical challenges are less severe than those in more densely populated areas and hotspots, we must continue to deal with the very same strains and stress factors those populated communities do. Our children, our elderly, our homeless and our addiction-afflicted are finding it much harder to receive and access the services they require. We also have the added misery of our dairy farmers having to “dump” their precious product and our meat suppliers approaching a crisis of what to do with their animals. A slow reopening will help stave off the hard choices they will otherwise face: cutting back production, needing greater government assistance or falling into bankruptcy. Farmers who retain their markets are having trouble finding workers to assist because guest workers are no longer readily available and many unemployed individuals are fearful of going against official advice to stay home.

A troubling aspect of the shutdown that has received too little attention among the continual alarms is the rise in abuse cases. What we hear from organizations and individuals in protective services is very worrying. This is in large part anecdotal because individuals at risk are in more vulnerable situations but removed from most mandatory reporters. To the extent that people can go back to work, it helps relieve the stresses that contribute to abuse and makes potential victims less isolated.

We are all looking for solutions that provide a safe and responsible return to life. We also recognize that there will be employers and employees unwilling to resume operations and work until they have greater assurance that the coronavirus will not pick up in intensity once again. Any action must accommodate their interests as well.

The 80th District stands ready to pilot a safe and responsible return to economic health. What we gain in experience here may help guide us in addressing the other immense challenge we will soon confront – determining how to effectively proceed with essential education for children and for workers who may choose or be forced to pursue new careers.

Our purpose here is not to criticize or second-guess actions taken to date. Rather, it is to urge that we collectively seriously explore viable possibilities for charting a cooperative and constructive path forward. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



State Representative Jim Gregory
80th Legislative District