

Jerome Delvin, *District 1*

Shon Small, *District 2*

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Jerrod MacPherson
County Administrator

Matt Rasmussen
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Board of County Commissioners

May 5, 2020

The Honorable Jay Inslee, Governor
Office of the Governor
Post Office Box 40002
Olympia, Washington 98504-0002

Dear Governor Inslee,

We are living in unprecedented times. COVID-19 has wrought sudden and unexpected impacts that are profoundly testing our governments, businesses, and citizens. However, our communities are resilient and are rising to the challenge.

We appreciate your strong, early responses in light of unknown consequences and dire forecasts. Washington flattened its curve early and effectively, and we saved ourselves from many of the deeper and more ominous situations realized in some other parts of the country.

As governor of our state, you declared a state of emergency on February 29, 2020 and issued your "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" order on March 23, 2020. We are now many weeks into these proclamations and are seeing the unintended effects of such measures. Out here in the shires in the world beyond Olympia, we are seeing businesses closing, and families dealing with the unnavigable combined stresses of income loss, debt, and lack of childcare. In recent days you have talked about a *phased approach* to opening the state's economy and a return to some sense of normalcy, but these remarks have been vague on both the specifics and the timelines. We are afraid that we are reaching the cliché moment of "the solution being worse than the problem."

Our citizens look to us to help and advocate for them. As commissioners, we must look the very people in the eye everyday who elected us and tell them that we are trying to change things. Sometimes they blame us, or expect that we can assist them in ways which we are powerless to do. We are starting to see protests in our community, both organized and individual, such as the rally held on our courthouse steps just this past Friday. We need your help in alleviating the mounting pain that your orders are inflicting.

Governor, COVID-19 is real and it is as serious of an issue as we have faced in a generation. We appreciate your leadership is stabilizing our collective ship, but now we need your leadership at the helm in sailing this ship to calmer seas. We need that to begin now. Your phased approach to reopening Washington's economy and society seems reasonable, but we need timelines, we need regional options, and we need more urgency.

The proclamations you have issued have deemed a great number of businesses in Benton County as “non-essential”. Many of us are learning now that “essential” lies in the eyes of the beholder. After hearing from many of our stakeholders, we feel strongly that many important businesses in our community can begin reopening following strict guidelines for use of personal protective equipment, “social distancing”, and improved sanitation practices, among other things. For example, a number of our restaurants have formed a coalition to develop these protocols and assist each other with implementation. People are adaptive and can respond to stress if you let them. Allowing this to happen would put thousands of Washingtonians back to work, greatly improving the long-term outlook for our economy and the overall health of our community. We are at a point where literally weeks and days matter, as that can be the difference between businesses shuttering permanently and citizens being out of jobs. As mentioned, many employers in Benton County are adapting already or are ready to; they just need a green light to reopen. Governor, your phased approach needs specifics and more aggressive timelines, but also needs regional flexibility so that communities like ours with resilient and adaptable people, systems, healthcare infrastructure can get back to work.

We have been and will continue to work closely with the Benton-Franklin Health District to monitor testing, contact tracing, and hot spots in the community to make sure that we can all respond and adjust accordingly. In the meantime, and with all things being considered, it is our position that nearly everything in the community should be allowed to reopen by the end of May with appropriate controls in place.

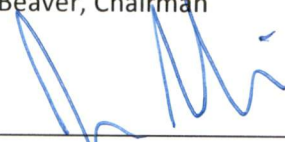
Thank you for the hard work of yourself, your staff, and your team of advisors whom we know are working tirelessly through piles of data and pressure from all directions. We stand ready to assist you in getting all of Washington back on the road to recovery, but that assistance needs to be a two-way street.

Sincerely,

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS



Jim Beaver, Chairman



Jerome Delvin



Shon Small