

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 13, 2020

Contact: Nathaniel Brown
971-219-5561

nathanielbrown@oregonbusinessindustry.com

Oregon businesses urge governor to consider alternatives to business closures to slow spread of COVID-19

The Coronavirus Recovery Business Coalition, a large and diverse alliance of businesses and business associations, sent the attached letter to Governor Brown, urging her to pause on any future business closures or curtailed operations and instead engage in a series of actions the state can take to slow the spread of the virus.

The letter includes a five-point action plan that the coalition urges the Governor to implement immediately to help Oregonians understand how to protect themselves, their families and their friends from COVID-19. That action plan includes implementing a COVID-19 public information campaign, increasing rapid testing and contact tracing, convening a task force to address social and community spread, establishing an advisory panel to address COVID needs and establishing a comprehensive vaccine distribution plan.

“Like many Oregonians, we are also concerned about the significant uptick in positive COVID-19 cases of the past few weeks,” said Sandra McDonough, president and CEO of Oregon Business & Industry. “We are committed to engaging and working with the governor to implement the actions that need to be taken to slow the spread of this dangerous virus, while safely keeping open the doors of the businesses that feed our families, support our communities and keep our economy afloat.

“When the first shut-down happened last March, we had the promise of federal unemployment support and small business assistance,” McDonough continued. “That is not the case today. Business closures now mean families across Oregon will lose their incomes right as the holiday season commences, and businesses that rely on holiday sales will face a grim future. We know the governor understands this and we want to work with her to prevent it.”

The letter also emphasizes the steps that Oregon’s businesses have taken to implement strict safety standards in all workplaces throughout the state, punctuated by the new Oregon OSHA COVID-19 Temporary Rule, which goes into effect on Monday, Nov. 16. Following the implementation of this new rule, Oregon will lead the nation with its new compliance-driven regulatory approach that includes serious penalties.

The coalition also emphasizes that their research shows that the industry sectors that were closed during the pandemic account for **less than one-half of one percent** of total COVID-19 cases and that shutting them down, especially when the state has continually reiterated that cases are spreading through private social gatherings, will not curb the spread of COVID-19.

“Businesses throughout Oregon have proven that they can make the operational changes necessary to keep their employees and their customers safe, even during this unprecedented pandemic. What we need now is a plan to address the root of the problem without causing additional harm to Oregonians throughout the state,” said Jason Brandt, president and CEO of the Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association.

The coalition letter can be viewed below.

###



November 13, 2020

Dear Gov. Brown,

We share your alarm at the growing number of COVID-19 cases in Oregon, and we want to work with you to the fullest extent possible to curb the spread of this dangerous disease as quickly as we can. We know you are facing difficult decisions with far-reaching implications, but we implore you to pause a moment and consider alternatives to renewed business closures and curtailed operations.

As representatives of employers across Oregon, we have outlined for you a series of action steps the state can take immediately to help Oregonians understand how to protect themselves, their families and their friends from this dangerous virus. We believe the focus of your actions must be on the most prevalent cause of COVID-19 spread, **social gatherings**. We are extremely concerned that, based on your previous statements, you appear poised to take a different approach, ordering shutdowns and other operational restrictions on Oregon businesses. We hope you will consider the very real impact such a decision will have on struggling businesses, the employees who may lose their jobs, and our already troubled state economy. We know you are facing difficult decisions with far-reaching implications, but we implore you consider other options, including the actions we are proposing, before issuing any further business restrictions.

Under your leadership, Oregonians have fought valiantly over the last nine months to limit the spread of COVID-19. Working together, we have had tremendous success, with some of the lowest infection rates in the country. Now, however, we find ourselves at a critical junction. We

recognize you need to respond as cases are increasing rapidly right as we enter the holiday season, but this is also a crucial time for many Oregon businesses already struggling to survive in this difficult COVID-19 economy.

We support any immediate actions you may take to provide Oregonians with guidance for how they can celebrate the 2020 holiday season safely, and we ask you to be thoughtful about what orders and guidance will be most effective at this stage in the COVID-19 crisis. Based on what we know about the disease transmission and the data that shows COVID-19 transmission happens in social situations, further restrictions and business closures at this point in the pandemic will yield little benefit in limiting new COVID cases. Your focus **must** be on showing Oregonians how they can manage personal behaviors to improve safety for their families, neighbors, and themselves – and on ensuring there is broad access to COVID testing to limit the spread.

We have learned a lot since the pandemic started. Your own statistics have shown that social gatherings are the most prevalent sources of COVID-19 spread. OSHA infectious disease rules go into effect Monday. Oregon leads the nation with our new compliance-driven regulatory approach that includes serious penalties. Businesses that would likely face additional restrictions have implemented every standard you've asked for and the exposure data shows the measures in place have been effective. Our research shows that the industry sectors that were closed during the pandemic account for **less than one-half of one percent** of total COVID-19 cases. Shutting them down will not help curb the spread of COVID-19.

Before imposing new restrictions on Oregon businesses, please give the OSHA rules an opportunity to provide an even greater level of safety, as businesses begin implementing them next week. Employers are embracing the new rules and we are working as hard we can as fast as we can to meet tight timelines for risk assessment, infection control plans and training for **all** employees to comply with these new rules. Employers have never been more focused on the education effort required to remind employees over the next six weeks what they need to do to stay safe at work. To truly stop the spread of COVID-19, we need you, as our governor, to focus your attention on strategies to stop the spread of COVID-19 at social gatherings by reminding Oregonians of what they need to do to protect their friends and families.

We know addressing this crisis is a constantly evolving situation and appreciate any opportunity to help provide input and expertise on these issues. Resorting to previously enacted restrictions and closures that ultimately punish businesses for spread that is outside of their control is **not** the right solution. As the dynamics of transmission and spread constantly shift during this pandemic, so too should our approach to combatting it so we can ensure we take the best, most effective steps to curb the spread of COVID-19.

We implore you, Governor, if you are considering additional restrictions or actual closures, please take a pause. Let us work with you to develop a better plan. Arbitrarily closing businesses and reacting to this crisis without a plan that addresses the root of the problem will certainly harm Oregonians across our state without ensuring any real results.

Action Plan to Immediately Slow the Spread of COVID-19

Recognizing the dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases and resulting hospitalizations in Oregon, the business community is recommending this action plan to immediately address and invest in the very real issues around social interactions and the resulting community spread of COVID-19. Oregon has taken bold steps to prevent spread in businesses and the effectiveness of the protection measures businesses across our state have embraced and implemented is clear. The current situation demands action and planning to focus on how we can mitigate the exposure risks driving increased infections. We welcome immediate discussions to consider these solutions:

Implement a Comprehensive COVID-19 Public Affairs Campaign:

The early “Stay Home, Save Lives” public affairs campaign developed and implemented by the state was very effective in encouraging Oregonians comply with mandates and stay safe. The campaign clearly and successfully articulated how Oregonians could limit exposure to limit the spread during the pandemic.

Nine months into the crisis, Oregonians seem complacent. They follow requirements at work and, to some extent, in public but are clearly ignoring calls to limit social interaction with friends and family. We recommend the state immediately launch a new public affairs campaign to focus on the persistent issue of social spread that is driving the rising COVID-19 case rate. Additionally, Oregonians need new guidance on how they can safely prepare for the holidays to safely celebrate with family and friends. The campaign should highlight the importance of wearing masks and social distancing, even with friends and family. It should provide guidance to limit the scope of celebrations, ways to establish safer, stable groups, reminders about when you should stay home to protect friends and family and provide strategies to ensure important traditions, like holiday shopping, can continue safely. Oregonians need to know what to expect due to safety measures in retail establishments and should be encouraged to spread their shopping over a six-week period to help avoid crowds. They should celebrate the holidays but need guidance to do so safely.

Businesses throughout Oregon have gone to great lengths to make workplaces safe, and we have learned a lot since the pandemic started. Now, we need Oregonians to embrace their personal responsibility to protect others by reminding them what’s at stake and encouraging them to limit any gatherings, group sizes at to always use proven safety measures like masks and social distancing while enjoying the holiday season. Nobody wants to expose their loved ones to COVID-19, but we need the state’s leadership implement and awareness campaign to remind Oregonians that protecting loved ones from COVID-19 is the best gift they can give this holiday season.

Develop a Comprehensive Testing Plan to Increase Rapid Testing and Contact Tracing Statewide:

Data has shown in other states and countries that increased testing aids with contact tracing and identifying infections before they become outbreaks. Oregon needs a comprehensive

testing strategy immediately that provides rapid testing capabilities for *all* communities with centralized testing locations, access to community testing through *every* Oregon County and that uses common protocols Oregonians can understand and rely on. The State must be the centralized hub to ensure testing in every community is readily available and easily accessible.

OHA announced in early October that 60,000-80,000 rapid antigen tests would be available each week through the end of the year, yet OHA data showed only 34,591 tests completed in the most recent weekly report. The patchwork of community approaches to testing is confusing, especially for those who may be sick. We urge implementation of aggressive testing strategies during the holiday season and utilization of all resources available to immediately expand rapid testing availability and contact tracing. If Oregonians can more easily access rapid testing, it could mitigate some of the spread from social gatherings.

Convene a Task Force to Address Social and Community Spread:

The problems we face with outbreaks due to social engagements and community spread are not unique to Oregon and are not going away soon. We must identify policies adopted in other states and countries to address this issue and convene experts who can think outside of the box to identify effective policies to contain exposure in these circumstances. What we are doing isn't working and we must determine a better approach that address the actual source of increased infections.

Establish a Reconfigured Economic Advisory Panel to Address Continued COVID Needs:

The hard truth is CARES Act money runs out at the end of the year and we will likely continue to face challenges with containing the spread. With renewed hope that additional COVID-relief funds may become available to address challenges we continue to face, we need to plan now to maximize those investments or determine alternative solutions. Employers still face serious economic challenges and increased costs associated with addressing COVID-19. Some programs established by the State have had positive impacts for both employers and employees, but others have not been successful. An Economic Advisory Panel of actual business owners dealing with the realities of these impacts and programs should be convened to review existing programs, identify successes and propose additional solutions to ensure businesses are able to continue efforts to protect employees and customers as current resources dry up.

Early Establishment of a Comprehensive Vaccine Distribution Plan:

It's imperative that Oregon be ready to immediately launch a vaccine distribution plan. We know from our experience with testing the key challenges facing the State as you try to manage such a broad distribution plan. The Oregon COVID Vaccination Plan is a good start to outline that process, but what has been seriously lacking is any direct engagement with the business community to solicit our input or assistance in vaccine rollout. Businesses are responsible for large scale distribution in every corner of the state and can offer insight into vaccine distribution strategies considering practical realities we deal with every day. Citing the CISA essential worker list is fine for the first draft, but that needs refined and businesses have an in-depth understanding of how to get products to our customers and ensure essential worker distribution is done in a way that works. We implore you engage the business community in

discussion and additional planning to address how we can position Oregon to be a leader in the rollout of a COVID-19 vaccine to ensure we are prepared to effectively and efficiently distribute a vaccine once it becomes available.