

November 20, 2020

The Honorable Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Dear Governor Inslee,

I write to you on behalf of the people of Yakima County in response to your renewed restrictions.

Yakima County reached Phase 2 successfully in late October and had been working cooperatively to manage our safe school reopening. We have been using contact tracing to find our cases, and we have been managing any small clusters of cases without issue. We know how to execute locally, after months of practice.

Yakima County has been called out by you repeatedly over the last several months in press conferences, as we have provided the state's "best practices" for managing the pandemic. Your Department of Health has duplicated our "mask up to open up" campaign, and they've purchased ads to spread our message across the state. You've used our county's policies as an example for other counties. Our agricultural COVID safety systems were held up as examples for other ag counties.

We have demonstrated an excellent ability to manage our disease curve, bringing it steadily downward, even when we were opening business in our modified phase one at the height of the pandemic. We have been committed as a community and worked together as a team, forming business taskforces and working with Yakima County Conference of Governments to communicate a unified message. As you witnessed firsthand when you visited Yakima County and spoke to several of us in June, our many city leaders and Commissioners have worked collectively to move us from the media label as "worst county on the west coast" to providing those best practices for everyone else to duplicate.

Yet, you have decided to close our county in a blanket statewide action. This decision wiped away all the progress we have made in Yakima County. This action takes away our incentive to perform because we have been lumped together with counties who do not have a committed and community-minded public, as we have had here.

As a result of this action, our people and businesses are rising up in opposition to your order, instead of pulling together.

We ask again that you allow for local control. We believe we have a better ability to manage the pandemic locally. We can lead our people and provide better results. When we asked for local control, along with the other Eastside counties back in May, you did not respond. We ask that you reconsider.

We further understand that you are currently scrapping the "Safe Start" plan and abandoning your phased approach to reopening. Your new plans, as they've been described, allow for moving forward and backward, depending on various metrics. We respectfully request different metrics for reopening than what was used months ago. The current metrics on the Risk Assessment Dashboard have been especially unfair and unattainable to rural counties, where our economies do not allow the ability to telecommute like is possible in urban settings.

Like the rest of the state, our cities and towns are facing deficits in their budgets, businesses are closing, and many of our people cannot pay their bills. Our restaurant industry is particularly vulnerable to permanent closure, as they operate on razor thin margins already, before COVID-19 restrictions, reduced capacity and months of closure. The loss of these businesses will bring long-term effects of lost jobs, disruptions in the food supply chain, and empty storefronts across the state. Rural counties typically have slower economic recoveries, so this will hit Yakima County especially hard.

Lastly, Governor, our county is already at higher risk for economic devastation because our communities are not wealthy. Our communities are further disadvantaged because we were locked down in “modified phase 1” for months longer than the other counties who quickly advanced in phases. Many of our businesses just reopened a few short weeks ago, brought back their staff, and purchased inventory -- only to be shut back down and experience further losses now. These businesses simply cannot sustain even a month of this new shutdown.

Please reconsider your position and allow counties to manage their pandemic response individually. The unfairness of your order is only going to contribute to civil disobedience and unwillingness to follow best practices. Our business owners are the pillars of our community, Governor. They support our community’s non-profits, sports teams, schools and so much more. Many of these law-abiding business owners have stated that they will no longer follow your lead, should this unfair shutdown stand.

In the meantime, our County Commission is pushing to get a final \$4.5M round of CARES grants out immediately to our affected businesses. This will be an interim measure for the near term, but will not allow for their recovery, should your decision to keep businesses closed until December 14th stand.

Sincerely,

Vicki Baker
Yakima County Commissioner, District 1

cc: Yakima County Commissioners