

There's a path to reopen New Mexico safely

BY DALE JANWAY / MAYOR, CARLSBAD

Monday, April 20th, 2020 at 12:02am

Over the past few days, an increasing number of New Mexicans have insisted on the development of a clear path forward in terms of getting our economy running again.

That is not in any way dismissive of the very real public health crisis we are facing, both here and across the world. The guidelines for social distancing and stay-at-home instructions are still essential for beating COVID-19.

But a growing number of small-business owners and elected officials have become increasingly vocal with expressing their very legitimate concern that the current lines dividing essential and nonessential businesses are not logical and are especially unfair to small businesses and the thousands of people who rely on them for their livelihood.

Additionally, as these closure instructions continue to be extended for a longer period of time, there is growing fear that no amount of federal assistance programs will ever come close to getting our citizens back on their feet economically. We do not want to survive this crisis with nothing left of our society. These executive health orders were put in place by our governor. Municipalities such as the city of Carlsbad are in the same predicament in terms of compliance with these orders as everyone else.

How do we respectfully address economic concerns while maintaining the highest level of health protection? Even most of our state's health care providers will soon have to lay off employees because nonessential operations have ceased. Many of these "nonessential" procedures, such as mammograms and colonoscopies, are preventive measures that save lives.

Last week, Farmington Mayor Nate Duckett issued a declaration calling on the governor to consider modifying the public health orders to permit all businesses to immediately reopen at 20% of maximum capacity, while also adhering to social distancing guidelines. An Eddy County business owner has established an online petition making a similar request that has received several thousand signatures.

Carla Sonntag, president and founder of the New Mexico Business Coalition (NMBC), has presented a path forward that we believe contains many excellent ideas. NMBC suggests we continue with social distancing guidelines and that vulnerable citizens with significant health issues continue to remain sheltered. Masks are recommended for customers and employees in public shopping areas.

As Duckett stated, the NMBC is recommending all businesses that can operate under the same guidelines currently in effect of a 20% occupancy be allowed to do so and open back up immediately. Outdoor recreational facilities should also be allowed to open back up at a limited capacity, as well.

In early May, NMBC recommends these businesses and outdoor recreational facilities be allowed to operate at 50% capacity. They recommend incremental increases to this capacity throughout the month. NMBC also recommends opening indoor recreational facilities to a limited capacity by late May. You can read NMBC's entire plan at nmbizcoalition.org/.

Let's again make this clear – we are not dismissing the very real health concerns presented by COVID-19. Our community has been fortunate so far to have a small number of cases due to social distancing taking place and our rural environment. My sincere thanks go out to everyone who has worked so hard to keep the spread of COVID-19 to a minimum in our area. However, it is well past time that we begin to have a serious discussion on healthy ways to reopen New Mexico.

We spoke directly with the Governor's Office about this issue on Thursday. We have been assured the economic well-being of our small businesses and our residents remains an extremely vital facet of this health crisis. We appreciate the governor for reaching out to us directly and hope we can continue to discuss safe ways to get New Mexico back on its feet.

We endorse the New Mexico Business Coalition's call for the state to immediately allow all businesses to reopen at a limited and reasonable capacity. We encourage Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham to work closely with leaders across New Mexico in developing the path forward.