

Reopening: County extended restrictions through May

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project manager, said the county will get 500 more testing kits as the state loosens testing requirements, with a promise of more tests once they are used.

Phased reopening

The state has set up work groups to look at how to lift restrictions on restaurants, retail, child care, personal services, transit and outdoor recreation. Officials hope to finalize the framework for a phased reopening by early May.

Under a first phase, social gatherings could increase to 10 people, although vulnerable populations would be asked to continue sheltering at home. Restaurants and bars could open to sit-down dining with strict physical distancing and sanitation protocols.

If coronavirus symptoms and cases continue to slide, a second phase would increase social gatherings to 50 people, allow nonessential travel and reopen schools, gyms and other large venues with social distancing.

A third phase would allow mass gatherings, unrestricted employment and visits to vulnerable populations in nursing homes.

Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer reached out to



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

The Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce encourages passersby to stay home to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

other mayors to review the governor’s framework and provide feedback to the county. They signaled their support for the county’s leadership and a science-based, synchronized approach.

“If individual cities were to open differing parts of their economies, it could result in serious repercussions for our people, law enforcement and business communities,” Balensifer wrote in an email from the mayors to county leadership.

County Manager Don Bohn believes the county is weeks away from the first phase of reopening.

“It’s not going to be as quick as some people would hope,” he said. “But I think that falls into the prudence category because there are issues with capacity to test and some other things that need to continually expand for us to really open it up.”

Bohn described the county as like an insulated box with the aggressive social distancing measures in place. The county needs to see how a phased reopening affects locals before making decisions that will invite visitors, he said.

The county Board of Commissioners voted

Wednesday to extend the county’s emergency declaration and the emergency order closing hotels, vacation rentals and campgrounds to visitors through May. The Warrenton City Commission will likely sync its emergency order to the county’s at its next meeting on Tuesday. The Astoria City Council extended a similar emergency order through at least May 18.

The county intends on keeping restrictions on hotels until the governor lifts limits on nonessential travel in a second phase of reopening. County leaders along

the coast also met with the governor’s office and state parks officials Thursday to get consensus on how to move forward in regards to parks and beaches.

Calls to reopen

Although most North Coast leaders are in consensus about moving forward cautiously, many have received pressure from constituents to reopen.

County Commissioner Sarah Nebeker said she has received a lot of calls from small businesses expressing concern and confusion. She said some might see the extension of the county’s emergency orders as punitive.

Commissioner Mark Kujala believes the county is taking the right approach, but said people will become more restless as long as they are not getting help. “Folks aren’t receiving their unemployment benefits,” he said. “They filed six, seven weeks ago and (they have) yet to get payments in a lot of cases. And this is causing a lot of the pressure that we hear about folks wanting to get back to work and open up.”

Warrenton is preparing a resolution to demand state unemployment benefits be released. At a recent Warrenton City Commission meet-

ing, Commissioner Mark Baldwin said the region needs to get back to business as usual if it looks like it dodged a bullet with the coronavirus.

“There are a lot of people that are not working, not able to work, don’t know if they’re going back to work,” he said. “And the sooner we answer those questions, the more trust and clarity we give them.”

Balensifer said he’s mostly heard from people applauding the city’s efforts to stem the spread of the virus and from those who think it’s too soon to start reopening.

“I’ve gotten a lot of non-constituents from other cities — not just in the county but outside the county — asking me to open up,” he said. “Sorry, I’m not really responsible for the rest of the state’s people. I’m responsible to my constituents first and foremost.”

Echoing Warrenton and the county, Astoria Mayor Bruce Jones stressed a phased reopening that prioritizes locals.

“We really want to take a locals-first approach, where it’s reopening for locals, phase 1 for locals, phase 2 for locals, phase 3 for locals,” he said. “And then we look at, OK, now how about reopening to the rest of the world?”

Relief: New plan would add \$321 billion to the paycheck program

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larger businesses get access to the funding.”

At a recent Astoria City Council meeting, Kevin Leahy, the director of the small business center, said one local business got \$384,000 from the paycheck program.

But the first round of the paycheck program left small businesses fuming over how banks handled the forgivable

loans. Small business owners sued Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, U.S. Bank and Wells Fargo, claiming they prioritized larger loans with larger companies that would provide more lucrative commissions to bankers.

Pete Gimre, owner of the 128-year-old Gimre’s Shoes, has been running the shop by himself since laying off his staff of four so they could collect unemployment. He

recently found out his application for the paycheck program had been approved, but is still waiting for the next round of funding to hopefully rehire his staff.

Gimre echoed complaints that large businesses have been prioritized with the disaster loans and paycheck program.

“I give credit to the local bank, the local community bank ... but once you got

beyond the size of the local banks, it got tough for small businesses to get in that first round,” he said.

Gimre said the Small Business Administration has shown its true colors in looking out for larger companies while giving the shaft to Main Street.

The newest \$484 billion coronavirus relief plan approved by Congress would add \$321 billion to the pay-

check program, \$60 billion of it reserved for lending by smaller depository institutions, credit unions and community financial institutions.

Wauna Federal Credit Union saw money in the first iteration of the paycheck program run out within a day of its accepting applications. Debi Smiley, the chief marketing officer for Wauna, said the lender has been busy preparing the 30 or so members

who reached out initially to get in the queue for the second round of funding.

“I’m very hopeful,” said Pam Weller, an assistant vice president of commercial lending at Wauna who is overseeing paycheck program applications. “I’m very anxious for the site to come back up and say, ‘Hey, we’re receiving applications,’ so that we can help some of our small businesses.”

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