

Oregon coronavirus council points out ambiguity, uncertainty in state reopening plan

By Dick Hughes
For the Oregon Capital Bureau

State officials initially did not want to include bars in the first phase of reopening Oregon counties. That is why bars and restaurants that open for dine-in service must close by 10 p.m. under the guidelines announced by Gov. Kate Brown.

"It was an imperfect way to get at kind of what the intent was. Our intention was never to open bars," said Leah Horner, who is Brown's adviser on jobs and the economy. "But we didn't want to close down people's ability to get a drink from a bar in a restaurant."

There was not a clear licensure that would allow restaurants to serve liquor but keep other bars closed.

"The only way to get at that was by putting a 10 p.m. closure time," Horner said Friday during a videoconference of the Governor's Coronavirus Economic Advisory Council.

Council members pointed to ambiguity and uncertainty in the state's three-phase criteria for when certain businesses operations and public activities should resume.

Horner acknowledged that officials were still figuring out how to share adequate information about the reopening from closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Lights from downtown businesses glisten off the pavement Saturday after a passing rain shower covered a nearly empty Wall Street in downtown Bend.

The Bulletin/Ryan Brennecke

As of May 15, furniture stores, art galleries, jewelry shops and boutiques may reopen if they follow the state's physical distancing and health guidelines. Many other businesses can't open until their county government files a reopening plan and then receives state approval.

Horner, who also is the governor's Regional Solutions director, said many details remain in flux, such as when face coverings would be required at certain types of businesses. "It may take a little bit to ramp up

to that. We're still looking at what that timeline looks like but acknowledging there needs to be a little more clarity on that," she said.

Guidelines on child care, summer school, camps, gyms and transit will be announced next week. After talking with gym owners, Horner said, officials realized that some gym operations could reopen safely.

Members of the economic advisory council asked for clarity on liability protections, travel and other issues.

"As counties open up, if Deschutes County is open but Marion County is closed, could the residents of Salem travel to Deschutes County?" asked Todd Davidson of Travel Oregon.

Jason Brandt of the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association pointed out that Brown did not shut down lodging but restricted travel, leaving the lodging industry in a bind.

"For a lot of our lodging operators, they're kind of just waiting on pins and needles to understand where

they fit in on the phases," Brandt said. "And then how they can prove, which a lot of them can already right now, that their operations are entirely safe for their guests and also for their employees?"

He and others also asked about the prospects for weddings, group meetings and other events in hotels and elsewhere, as well as operations of zoos, museums and gardens.

"State Fair folks said they're not going to operate, but does that mean some of these maybe smaller meetings can still occur? I think the answer is probably yes," Horner said. "So we're going to be working through some of those pieces."

Union officials asked that better information be provided for workers, including what they should do if they are called back to their jobs but lack child care or are at high risk of contracting COVID-19.

The governor's staff said they are starting on developing worker guidelines. They also confirmed that the annual state minimum wage increase would occur in July as scheduled.

Officials also announced that Business Oregon will be taking applications for matching grants for local governments that create COVID-19 grant or loan programs to assist very small businesses. The state initially will dispense \$2.5 million.

Governor: Oregon could reopen under 3-phase plan, but distancing likely for months

By Courtney Vaughn
Oregon Capital Bureau

A plan to reopen Oregon's businesses and allow social gatherings will rely on a three-phase approach, with major decisions being made at the county level, depending on local health conditions.

On Thursday, Gov. Kate Brown and state health officials cautioned that current measures regarding physical distancing and hygiene likely will remain in place for months to come, as some retailers in rural counties prepare to enter the first phase of reopening for in-person activities by Friday, May 15.

Brown's office said the goal with the phased reopening is to "minimize hospitalizations and deaths" and reduce risk to health care and frontline workers.

So far, Oregon has seen far fewer cases and fatalities from COVID-19 compared to other states and countries. The governor credited the stay-home orders and Oregonians' adherence to safety precautions

with the state's infection rate.

"These sacrifices have prevented as many as 70,000 COVID-19 infections," Brown said. "We still don't have everything we need, but things are definitely improving."

Brown likened the state's plans to testing out the ice on a frozen pond before going ice skating.

She and other health officials warned that "reopening still comes with risk."

"As we reopen parts of our economy, we know and expect that there may be an uptick in new coronavirus cases," Brown said Thursday.

Oregon's three-phase plan allows businesses, personal service providers and retailers to reopen on a conditional basis, with specific guidelines for each business sector. Returning to in-person activities will be dependent largely on the risk factor of each activity, as well as health conditions and the number of COVID-19 cases in each county and region across the state.

In all cases, state officials want residents to wear face masks when working in or entering any business, with exceptions for eating and drinking.

Phase 1: As soon as Friday, May 15 in some areas

In counties approved to open during Phase 1, restaurants and bars could allow patrons to dine on-site, so long as tables are 6 feet apart. Employees would need to wear face masks and coverings supplied by the business, and all activity must end by 10 p.m.

Fitness centers could open, with limits on the number of occupants, and salons also could reopen by appointment only, but they'd need to keep a log of every customer who visits, to allow for contact tracing by health departments if needed.

Standalone retail shops and boutiques also could resume activity under the Phase 1 plans, as long as they can follow specific guidelines laid

out by the Oregon Health Authority.

State leaders said they aren't recommending group gatherings of more than 10 people yet.

A county could move on to Phase 2 after three weeks, only if they continue to meet the parameters of Phase 1.

Before entering Phase 1, a county would need to demonstrate a declining prevalence of COVID-19: that is, a steady drop in hospitalizations for 14 days, with emergency room visits for COVID-like illnesses being below what they typically are for influenza.

Specific guidelines for testing regimens and contact tracing systems, along with supplies of personal protective equipment and other health care capacity also are identified as prerequisites in the state plan.

Phase 2: Similar to Phase 1, with expanded gathering sizes

Brown's office said the goal of Phase 2 is to further expand allowable gathering sizes, allow more people to work together in offices and allow visitation at congregational care facilities.

Phase 3: Concerts, festivals will be last to return

Large gatherings at places like festivals, concerts and sporting events, won't see a comeback anytime soon. Initial guidance from the state indicates they will be postponed until at least September, but large events could be delayed beyond that, until a vaccine or prevention is developed, draft guidelines indicate.

Thursday's announce-

ment followed draft plans the governor's office released earlier this week, and a reopening of some of the state's parks and recreational sites, where physical distancing could be practiced.

"It worked. Oregon flattened the curve," Pat Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority, said Thursday. "So far, we have avoided the tragic worst case scenarios we have seen play out around the world and in other places in the United States."

Allen said Oregon's COVID-19 death rate was the "eighth lowest in the country," but Allen and Brown cautioned that reopening certain aspects of public life doesn't mean the virus has diminished, and increased public activity could lead to a spike in infection.

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