

# Some Oregon businesses plan to open under lower tiered COVID-19 restrictions, despite governor's mandates

Some local officials support the 'Open Oregon' effort

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Oregon Capital Bureau

With the support of Sandy Mayor Stan Pulliam, Estacada Mayor Sean Drinkwine, Troutdale Mayor-elect Randy Lauer and Gresham City Councilor-elect Sue Piazza, among others, multiple metro area businesses plan to open to customers indoors on Friday, Jan. 1. The protest is being called "Open Oregon," and the goal is to highlight how brutal the state-mandated closures have been. Supporters are heralding it as an exercise of First Amendment rights.

"Several businesses have been reaching out to me, and they're in panic mode," Pulliam said prior to a two-week freeze called by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown in November, amid rising cases of COVID-19.

"They were already barely hanging on as it is. Now they're extremely worried that this will push them over the top, and that makes me worried about the future of Main Street economy."

Similar "Open Oregon" plans are in place in communities around the state, including Redmond.

For months, Pulliam has been a vocal opponent of the executive orders implemented by Brown, which have limited businesses' activities, and some more than others.

The risk of activities is determined by the Oregon Health Authority, which uses the following criteria:

- "Can individuals wear a mask at all times?"
- "Is there space to keep physical distance between households?"
- "Are there ways to limit time of exposure to other households?"
- "Does the space allow for increased airflow (such as operating outdoors or opening windows and doors)?"
- "Will these activities increase virus spread (such as singing, shouting and heavy breathing)?"

Under the current government framework, both Multnomah and Clackamas counties are considered "extreme risk" areas for the spread of COVID-19, meaning indoor recreational facilities like museums, theaters and athletic clubs must remain closed and indoor dining or drink consumption is also prohibited. Eating and drinking establishments are allowed to be open with outdoor seating at a capacity of 50 people, comprised of parties of six people per table from a limit of two households, maximum. They also must close by 11 p.m.

The "Open Oregon" movement calls on businesses to operate under "high risk" restrictions — one tier lower than the "extreme risk" restrictions currently in place — which allows for a reduced amount of indoor dining.

"This isn't about the governor. This isn't about me," Pulliam explained. "This is a movement of self-preservation for Main Street business owners. It's about those folks who have no other choice but to open. Why would we not want to take the compassionate and common sense change of course that would allow these business



PMG photo/Emily Lindstrand  
Sandy Mayor Stan Pulliam and Estacada Mayor Sean Drinkwine both spoke Dec. 29 at a rally to advocate for local businesses to open Jan. 1.

owners to open and put employees back to work in a safe manner that prevents the spread of COVID-19."

Both Pulliam and Drinkwine spoke at a rally in support of the reopening movement in Estacada Dec. 29.

"Rural America is bleeding," Drinkwine said. "It's about America standing for America. We all are America. We've got to get back to work. Without that, we fall apart."

"Business owners are wanting to follow (the governor's) guidelines; they just want to do it under guidelines that allow them to open their doors. We're wanting to do this in a safe way. Where's the evidence to keep these places closed? What I can find shows a 1.4% contribution to COVID spread from restaurants and bars," Pulliam said.

### Rallying for the right to increase revenue

With temperatures dropping, businesses say revenue from outdoor dining is declining as well. And the health clubs, which haven't been able to operate since late November, are feeling the lack of revenue made worse by a delay in gov-

ernment assistance.

Dean Hurford, owner of Bumpers Bar & Grill in Fairview, is supportive of the opening. Though he takes the threat of coronavirus very seriously, he said there is little logic in which businesses are allowed to be open, such as Nordstrom's or Home Depot, and the ones mandated to be shuttered or severely restricted such as restaurants and gyms.

"I can go into Home Depot and walk up and down and touch everything in the aisle and nothing is sanitized," Hurford said. "But you can't come into my restaurant where everything is sanitized. We bring you an individual plate, salt and pepper shakers have been sanitized, the waitress is wearing a mask."

The restrictions have been devastating for restaurants, with some closing permanently.

Bumpers wasn't immune to those struggles. As a result of the constraints, Hurford slashed his workforce from about 40 people to nine. His daily sales dropped from \$5,000-\$8,000 to around \$1,000 a day.

Likewise, Mark Eisenzimmer, president of Cascade Athletic Clubs, said gyms have not been a big vector for spreading the virus and can open safely with proper precautions.

"It just doesn't make sense. There is no science here," he said. "We're not being reckless or cavalier."

Eisenzimmer also pointed out that exercise is "an antidote" to the stress, depression and confinement many are experiencing due to the pandemic.

At Eagle Creek Saloon, owner Liz Mitchell and manager Megan Freauff said, if they don't reopen in a limited capacity, the establishment may not be around a year from now.

"When employees don't have a job, it's horrible. It's a horrible feeling when you have employees that maybe can't afford their electric bill. That's weighed on us a lot this year," Freauff said. "We care for our employees. We care for our community, and we need to open. If we don't open, some people don't even have two weeks."

Mitchell is also the owner of the Carver Hanger and the Redland Cafe. All three locations will open with reduced in-person seating on Jan. 1.

"We're going to follow all of the rules," Mitchell said. "Face masks will be required. For social distancing, we're going to close off tables, and no loitering."

"We are all going to be as safe as you possibly can, but we need to open. Our employees are bleeding," Freauff added.

Business at the restaurant has been slower while solely relying on takeout — which has also led to increased costs from more use of items like to-go containers and individually packaged condiments.

Both Mitchell and Freauff feel there is a double standard between what the COVID-19 restrictions allow larger stores and smaller businesses to do.

"We can still go to Costco. We can still go to Walmart and

those big chains. These small mom and pop places that make our communities and our country thrive are not able to thrive," Freauff said.

They also respect the fact that some customers may not be comfortable dining in at this time.

"If you're not comfortable coming into the restaurant, we're OK with that," Freauff said.

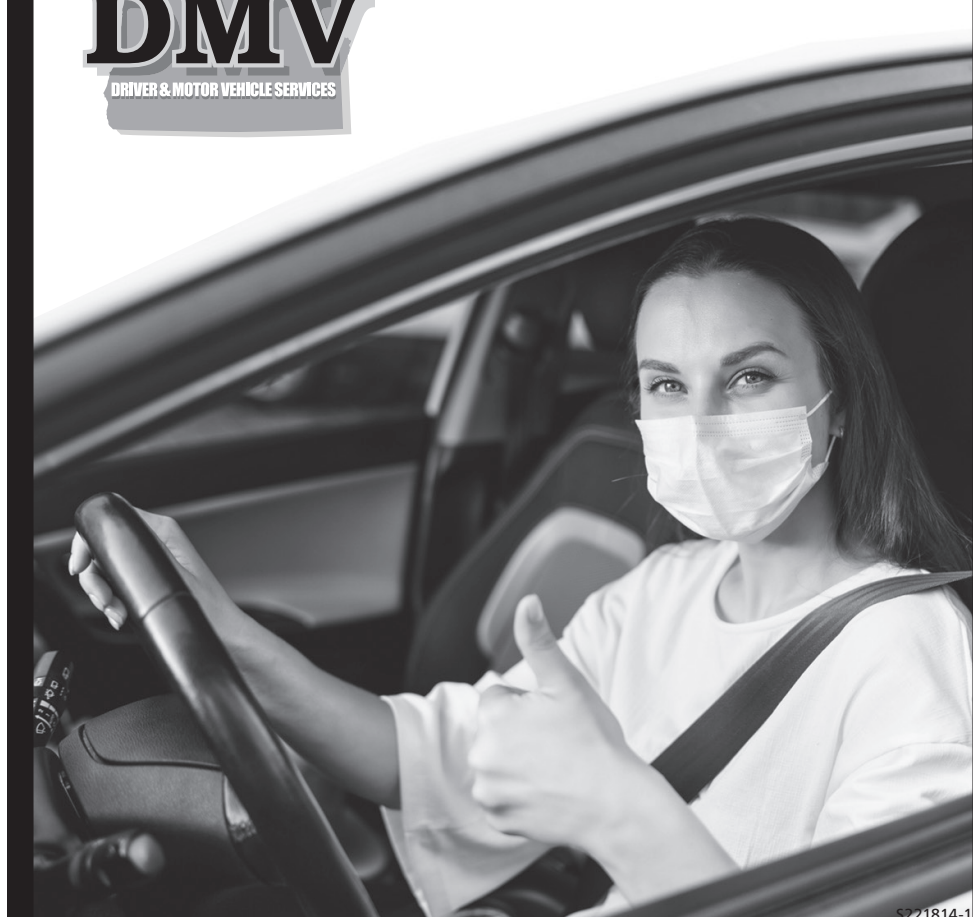
Mitchell is concerned with potential fines associated with reopening but, ultimately, believes it's the right thing to do.

"I've had a few sleepless nights, but I feel like, if we don't take a stand and show our presence and what business owners need and want, then we don't have any room to complain. If you're not willing to do something to be part of the solution, you can't complain about the problem," she said. "We're not asking for full capacity, we're not asking for free for all, where we take off our masks and spread things. We are asking for a compromise and a way for slowing the spread, and also keeping small business alive ... Our country was founded on free enterprise and people working hard, doing the right thing and getting ahead. And I think, if we kill that, we're in for a lot of trouble."

"We feel hopeless, helpless. No one to turn to," said Ria Brower, owner of Sandy Family Restaurant and Rias' Bar. "The governor has drugged (sic) us along for months, and there is no scientific evidence to back up her decisions ... All we're asking is that we get treated the same ... We would like to make a living also. I have bills that go out every month with no money coming in. I also have kids to feed. And I've worked really hard for the last nine years to build my business."

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