November 18, 2020

Honorable Governor Kate Brown  
900 Court St. NE, Room 254  
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Governor Brown,

We appreciate and understand the challenges you have faced as our Governor during this challenging time in Oregon. We have seen improvements in the response to COVID-19 and the executive decisions you have made that have slowed the spread of the virus. In our roles as state legislators, county commissioners and judges, and regional leaders, we’ve encouraged every effort available to do the same.

A one-size-fits-all approach to shutting down the state was logical and appropriate in March when the onset of this pandemic was new and was unknown. Over time, we have learned, adapted, adjusted and improved. Keeping counties and regions in a Phase II for an indefinite period of time is a one size fits all approach that does not work any longer.

It is time to re-evaluate the metrics and the ever-changing goal posts related to slowing the spread of COVID-19 in our rural, semi-rural, eastern and frontier communities. We have shut down for months, we have met the metrics required, we have followed the goal posts as they’ve moved, we have adhered to the rules, we have slowed the spread—and yet, our counties, communities, small businesses, K-12 schools, childcare and colleges, health departments and more, sit in a stale and stagnant state without forward progress. We have done and continue to do all that is within our capacity to slow the spread of COVID-19, and now, some of our border counties are being directly affected by decisions and actions from outside our state over which we have no control.

This is not a sustainable position for our communities.

Our COVID-19 cases will ebb and flow over the next several months just as they have over the last several weeks. This metric is not a reliable indicator of the situation. The metric that is most important to reconsider at this time is the original goal of ensuring there is adequate hospital capacity and not overwhelming our medical facilities. We have met this goal from the onset and continue to meet this goal. This must be the benchmark for future conversations on how we learn to live with COVID-19.

There is still much we don’t know about COVID-19, but what we do know is the continued closure and limitations under these guidelines disproportionally impact women, single-parent homes, rural communities and small businesses. Our students are struggling in their education
as well as their mental and emotional fitness, families have been stressed to the maximum, and
decade-old businesses that are the lifeblood of our Oregon communities have closed for good.

Over the past few weeks, we have safely met with school superintendents, the ODE Director,
county sheriffs, county public health authorities and agency representatives to discuss how we
move forward.

We must make significant changes to the way our systems are being managed going forward. It
is not realistic or sustainable to continue in Phase I or II, as currently described, for our districts,
counties and communities wherein.

We propose four areas for change:

1. **Restaurants and bars**: Our hospitality industry, restaurants and bars must be able to
stay open. The data shared by OHA does not show any indication that our restaurants
and bars are the cause of increased cases. In addition, our hospitality industry is
responsible for employing tens of thousands and Oregonians and keeping our already-
fragile economy moving. Our restaurants and bars need to be able to extend their hours
beyond the arbitrary closing time of 10:00pm and need to safely expand their indoor
occupancy especially as we head into the holiday season and winter when indoor
restaurants, lodging and tourism activity will grow. We are at risk for nearly 40% of our
remaining businesses closing in the next six months if we do not allow for reasonable
expansion of these services and industries.

2. **Schools**: Our schools need to be allowed to fully re-open for in-classroom learning, and
our students need to be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities. All teachers,
students, staff, and volunteers that want to return to in-person learning should be able
to do so in a safe manner. All teachers, students, staff, and volunteers that desire to
continue CDL should be able to do so. If it is safe for college athletes to return to sports,
assuredly it is safe for high school students. Parents need to be able to return to work,
and our students and teachers need the stability of the classroom.

3. **State Agencies**: We need to reopen our state agencies at all levels, including and
specifically DMVs, across the state. We would argue, and assume you would agree, that
our state agencies and state employees are essential. These agencies are funded with
public dollars and our public needs full access to these essential services.

4. **Religious institutions**: Release our churches and places of worship. While outliers will
exist as the exception, most churches and places of worship will be and have been more
than scrupulous in protecting their congregations from harm from COVID-19. Give
pastors, religious leaders and governing boards the latitude to exercise their best
judgement for safety.

We have been living with extreme difficulty with COVID-19 for over eight months and have
taken the necessary precautions during this time, but we have another six, 12, 18 months, or
longer to go as we continue to understand this pandemic. Further shutdowns are not
sustainable. We must adapt our Phases to allow for therapeutic remedies that appear to be on the horizon.

At this juncture, by not allowing our kids to go to school, our parents and families to work, our agencies to open for services, and our small businesses to reopen for business, we are failing our state and devastating the lives of tens of thousands of Oregonians. Our rural communities are being left out and left behind. As leaders, we are failing our constituents and the future of our state’s survival is at risk.

We urge you to consider a more realistic approach and set a course of action that allows for freedoms, safety, and sustainability to work in conjunction with one another. In order to accomplish this, we must empower our local public health authorities to work with the local elected leadership, both of whom fully know local situations, to work together and in partnership with the OHA to move forward with what can become a regional version of Phase II-A and Phase II-B.

We are having these conversations now, and more importantly, we are taking the necessary steps to develop these plans so we can act and move our unique regions forward towards a sustainable, viable future. Something has to change, and we’re prepared to move ahead.

**We have a simple ask.**

As the leaders chosen by Oregonians to represent their best interests and be their advocates, throughout and across our beautiful state, we would ask that the Governor and Governor’s office participate in these meetings and work with us, assess the proposals and plans we put forward, and consider the options we will be recommending for your consideration and approval.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Senator Lynn Findley  
Senate District 30

Senator Bill Hansell  
Senate District 29

Rep. Mark Owens  
House District 60

Senator Kim Thatcher  
Senate District 13

Senator Fred Girod  
Senate District 9
Tony DeBone  
Deschutes County Commissioner

Jim Hamsher  
Grant County Commissioner

Sam Palmer  
Grant County Commissioner

Pete Runnels  
Harney County Commissioner

Patty Dorroh  
Harney County Commissioner

Kristen Shelman  
Harney County Commissioner

Mae Huston  
Jefferson County Commissioner

Donnie Boyd  
Klamath County Commissioner

Derrick DeGroot  
Klamath County Commissioner

Kelley Minty Morris  
Klamath County Commissioner

Mark Albertson  
Lake County Commissioner

Brad Winters  
Lake County Commissioner

James Williams  
Lake County Commissioner

Donald Hodge  
Malheur County Commissioner
Larry Wilson
Malheur County Commissioner

Dan Joyce
Malheur County Commissioner

Melissa Lindsay
Morrow County Commissioner

Don Russell
Morrow County Commissioner

Jim Doherty
Morrow County Commissioner

Todd Nash
Wallowa County Commissioner

Craig Pope
Polk County Commissioner

Bill Elfering
Umatilla County Commissioner

George Murdock
Umatilla County Commissioner

John Shafer
Umatilla County Commissioner

Paul Anderes
Union County Commissioner

Matt Scarfo
Union County Commissioner

Donna Beverage
Union County Commissioner

Susan Roberts
Wallowa County Commissioner
Mary Starrett
Yamhill County Commissioner