

Joint Interim Committee on the Third Special Session/Roni Bartlett

To Whom it May Concern,

I have been a restaurant owner of multiple restaurants for over 15 years and am now a general manager for a local restaurant, and concurrently assist 2 other restaurants in grant writing, loan acquisition and marketing. I have also been a marketing manager for restaurants for same period of time.

I was hired as a general manager at my current restaurant to restructure it and increase revenue. In less than a year, my partner and I were able to raise sales by 60%, restore trust in the community for the restaurant, hire more people and have an over all viable business. This restaurant was on track for a minimum of another 20 - 40% rise in revenue due to other programs I was developing for the restaurant.

In my area, Columbia County, we were one the counties that was recently re-shut down because of the rising COVID infection rate. We are seeing even lower sales than the last round of closure. The loss of bar sales and lottery sales has created lay offs for my business. I have lost key employees to other industries due to the fact those employees could not survive on unemployment checks.

On a positive side, we were one of the more strict restaurants in our area for following the mandate. At the beginning, some customers where put off by it, as time wore on we were complimented for our procedures and social distancing protocols. We actually saw a rise in total revenue fairly quickly as word got out about our dedication to safety, especially among the elderly.

Once we open again, it will be like a Grand Opening - a re-re-re grand opening if you will. At each grand opening we have to hire new crew who are inexperienced. Each re-opening the restaurants struggle to create the experience and food quality that guests enjoyed. As grand, as a grand opening sounds they are anything but that from the other side of the counter. There are many moving pieces that depend on a team that has learned to work together and have some experience under their belt. Grand openings are stressful and often disappointing to the customers coming in. I personally have participated in 4 grand openings, not including the faux COVID driven grand re-openings. My take away, has always been - that each grand opening is a mountainous challenge, much like non-optional surgery.

A couple of salient points that I hope are echoed with my industry peers:

*Unless a lock down is nation wide, it doesn't seem like we will get COVID under control, as we can not control incoming travelers. As people have joked, it is like urinating in the deep end of the pool - no matter what you are going to get some on you. We feel that our next best choice is to follow the mandates as they have already been laid out and stay the course. The rise in cases seemingly are from social gatherings, that are outside of the industries control. Emphasis should be on educating the public about gatherings, maintaining social distancing and good sanitizing practices. Some fun and entertaining PSA's, marketing and advertising would probably go a long way for public opinion.

*Our industry is not the number one spreader of COVID, but we feel that we are being unduly punished by recent new rules, mandates, lock downs and fines. Where as a grocery store can stay open, our customer service industry is not allowed to operate.

*Other industries may have only 1 or 2 over-sight administrations - we have the Health Department, OLCC, Lottery, and OSHA, all of whom carry the potential to devastate our business, seemingly without any recourse on our parts.

*A workable public plan needs to be put in place that respects our industry and keeps public health on equal footing. There must be a compromise that satisfies both needs. The thought that we have gone through a 3 month long closure, without a plan for a next wave of a COVID outbreaks is poor planning at best. If I, as a manager have to look into a crystal ball and try to predict the future of my restaurant, I feel that the state can

also, have several public contingency plans for the flow of COVID in relation to economics, especially for the second largest employment sector in the nation. Not to brag, but that seems to make us kind of a big deal.

*The public should be as culpable as the hospitality industry to uphold the mandates. Asking restaurants to be the policeman for the public is an added responsibility, that while we are willing to take it on, we would like an assist from the government rather than only punitive outcomes. An example from an industry peer was when they had to call the authorities on a man who refused to leave and refused to wear a mask. When authorities were called, they indicated they could not help.

* Fines are far to punitive for a small enterprise / small a mom and pop. The large fines creates a situation where those businesses fined have no choice but to close, as they can not bear the weight of the fines. We as a nation are beginning to lose a massive library of interesting and varied cuisine, laying the ground work for large corporations to step in where there was once a small businesses.

*There is a coalition that has a plan, and we would like heard. This plan has been given to ORLA, Betsy Johnson and a few Columbia County politicians. Gov. Brown's office has reviewed it sent our request to the their scheduler, but has not, as of yet, contacted us for a further meeting. Our plan creates a positive relationship with the state, encourages small businesses to follow the mandates while aiding them economically.

*Should no real, clear plan come into view, the state will most likely see people go underground or just outright break the rules in a desire to survive, but then later creating further issues. We need to see some real collaboration before more restaurants, towns or area's go rogue.

Sincerely,

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