PASCACK VALLEY MAYORS' ASSOCIATION

August 25, 2020

Governor Phil Murphy
PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

RE: Return to Indoor Dining

Dear Governor Murphy:

Pascack Valley towns - once in the path of COVID-19's greater NYC epi-center - have "flattened the curve". We've supported local businesses operating within the parameters established by the Governor's Executive Orders. Now, with the changing season upon us, our successful expansion of outdoor commerce will contract in the fall and hibernate in the winter months ahead. Without further relaxations from the state, municipalities' hands are tied. Many small businesses are being shuttered permanently.

COVID-19 set upon us on the cusp of Spring. Businesses temporarily shut down to relieve an overburdened healthcare system. The expectation was not for a quick return to normalcy (the lack of a vaccine and proven therapeutics diminished that hope) but for a careful reopening, based on objective benchmarks, with mandatory safety protocols that businesses (and individuals) would follow to safeguard their staff, and their patrons.

While the future path of the virus is uncertain, certain truths are apparent: The lifespan of outdoor commerce is tethered to the mildness of the season and the vagaries of the weather. The limited economic activity we see along our downtown streets will not survive the onset of winter. And our small restaurant businesses cannot wait for a vaccine to go back inside.

The Pascack Valley Mayors recently met under a tent in the parking lot of a Park Ridge restaurant. Down the road, in Rockland County NY, restaurants as of June 25, were able to operate indoors, at 50% capacity.

The NYS COVID-19 Dashboard reveals no discernible upward tick in the 7 day averages of new cases from then until now. Those rates have remained flat. In at least one North Jersey town, actual **active** infections have tracked in **single digits since June 2; that's 11 straight weeks.**

Rockland County restaurant owners may not have been in a rush to resume service inside. The weather is still agreeable. Older diners, and those with high risk co-morbidities, may have opted against going inside. People have been adjusting their behavior to reduce their own exposure, for 6 months now.

New Jersey's COVID Dashboard shows new COVID deaths, statewide, declining steeply since the end of April. And flattening broadly, at a very low rate, since June 20th.

The virus' active footprint in Northern NJ, with much hardship and sacrifice, is demonstrably reduced. There are fewer than 500 current COVID-19 admissions in the entire state (as opposed to 8000 during the peak). And North Jersey hospitals are no longer desperately overrun. COVID hospitalizations at Hackensack University Medical Center at Pascack Valley are in single digits. And the patients' illnesses present less acutely. The rate of transmission (as of this writing) has fallen below the critical benchmark of 1.00 - to 0 .85.

We achieved these reductions while supermarkets and home centers drew regional shoppers into enclosed spaces for extended periods of time, with no chance of "Contact Tracing" those consumers - or sanitizing every touch.

With the onset of the cold weather, restaurants in NJ's Northern and Pascack Valley towns will inevitably lose patrons to southern NY venues that offer indoor dining, just a short car ride away. Aligning NJs unwinding with NY and CT's was supposed to prevent those border-crossing incentives.

Pascack Valley's restaurant owners only want an opportunity to operate under a rational, accessible and transparent set of rules – as their counterparts in NY have been afforded. COVID-19's progress is monitored daily and any loosening of restrictions can, if necessary, be immediately tightened again. North Jersey's smaller local dining venues are scaled for contact tracing and, as NYS data may suggest, can operate safely under state guidance.

If "data drives dates," the data suggests that NJ can safely return the decision to operate or patronize indoor dining, under reduced occupancies and strict protocols, to consumers and restaurant owners. It should do so now, before the cold weather arrives and while these small businesses still have a fighting chance.

Sincerely,

Skip Kelley
Executive Director
Pascack Valley Mayors' Association

Danielle DiPaola Mayor, Emerson	John Ruocco Mayor, Hillsdale	Michael Ghassali Mayor, Montvale	John M. Kramer Mayor, Old Tappan
Dianne Didio Mayor, Oradell	Keith Misciagna Mayor, Park Ridge	Glen Jasionowski Mayor, River Vale	Peter Calamari Mayor, Twp. Of Washington
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