May 26, 2020

Governor Gavin Newsom  
State of California  
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dr. Sonia Y. Angell  
State Public Health Officer and  
Director California Department of Public Health  
P.O. Box 997377, MS 0500  
Sacramento, CA 95899-7377

Dear Governor Newsom and Dr. Angell:

The City of Chico City Council commends you for the swift action taken by the State in March including the Orders that allowed California to have a fighting chance in the COVID-19 pandemic. The steps taken have proven to work, as the trend in California has not matched predictions and forecasts. The mitigation measures have allowed hospitals and health care systems to expand surge capacity and gather sufficient supplies and resources, and testing has become readily available. Being a vital, regional economic and jobs center for the North State, Chico truly appreciates the balanced approach you’ve had in navigating these challenging times and we write to seek additional support for our community and region.

Thanks to our residents and businesses who have voluntarily adhered to all State restrictions and guidance for almost two months, the City of Chico and Butte County, as a whole, had only 18 confirmed cases as of May 5th - one of the lowest lab-confirmed case counts in the State and equating to a rate of approximately .00008 per 100,000 population. Of the 18 cases, five (5) were hospitalized, two (2) of those hospitalized were in the ICU, and we are so fortunate to have had no deaths to-date. All 18 cases were released from isolation as of May 9, 2020. Now that Butte County has had expanded testing, we’ve seen the number of cases grow, but we are still one of the lowest rates in the nation, and still have had no deaths.

The Business Impact.

We appreciate your recent announcement that the State will allow local Health Officers, based on data-driven metrics and an attestation, to begin a phased reopening of some lower risk businesses and activities at the local level. On behalf of the City of Chico, and at the recommendation of our Health Officer and Public Health Director, the Council respectfully requests you amend your statewide Orders a bit further by allowing local Health Officers to phase in reopening of a mix of the State’s Stage 2 and 3 businesses and activities, based on local data and studies such as the Johns Hopkins Public Health Principles for Phased Reopening during COVID-19: Guidance to Governors. You might consider it a hybrid of Stages 2 and 3 in your roadmap. Examples of differences between the State’s defined Stage 2 and the Johns Hopkins guidance, are businesses that fall into the personal care sector such as hair salons, barbers, spas, and gyms and fitness studios, as well as recreational facilities such as lap pools and playgrounds. In consultation with our business sector teams and trade associations, these are businesses and activities that we believe can
put successful mitigations in place and reopen during Stage 2 rather than waiting for Stage 3. The health expert panel commits to tightening restrictions and closing businesses or activities if the panel determines a problematic outbreak from a particular sector has occurred. Seemingly, you’re already stepped into this type of allowance and we would ask that you further expand this ability for responsible regions.

Health and safety is all encompassing, and it is a constant balancing act to ensure that we are doing all we can on that front. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 virus has taken its toll across the world, including hard hit communities throughout the nation and some in our own State. In protecting the public from COVID-19, which we cannot eradicate at this time but can only manage through containment and mitigation, we must not lose sight of other threats to public health and safety.

- Economic hardship has public health and safety implications, especially when so many have lost their sources of income and health care coverage.
- Isolation, along with reduced in-person physical and mental health services, have significant public health and safety implications.

In an attempt to protect people from a virus that might make them extremely ill, or potentially kill them, we may be subjecting them to different public health threats that could have the same negative results.

The Orders, though absolutely called for in March, are placing undue burdens on individuals and businesses in Chico who have already been impacted by multiple disasters and the related economic fallout in the past three years. As you know, our region has had its share of disasters including:

- the federally-declared Lake Oroville Spillway Incident in 2017;
- one federally-declared and three State-declared wildfires in 2017;
- the federally-declared Camp Fire in 2018 (the most destructive wildfire in California’s history); and
- COVID-19.

With so many hardships and twists and turns experienced by those in our City and region, the City and our residents cannot sustain a shutdown of so many businesses any longer. We implore you to support our residents and businesses so many of them can get back to work and support themselves and their families, with appropriate mitigations and protections for the public and employees alike. The layered economic impacts to individuals, businesses, and local governments and districts may be far greater in the City of Chico and Butte County than other areas of the State, due to the back-to-back-to-back disasters we have experienced.

Under the current status of the State’s Orders, our region is experiencing the following:

- An observed spike in 911 calls from people with chronic health conditions who may be fearful to go to the doctor, hospital, or emergency room in light of COVID-19 and, therefore, exacerbate their health condition to a level where emergency response is necessary and/or death occurs;
- An increased level of violence, especially domestic violence, in the calls received by law enforcement; and
- Reduced reports of child abuse, as the community eyes that normally assist children in need are no longer there, and children are at home with only their potential abusers.

The community-wide trauma from multiple disasters weighs heavy on Butte County’s residents and the isolation and economic fear many now live with is only exacerbating that trauma. We are a strong and resilient community, but as human beings we have our limits – and this latest disaster is pushing our residents to those limits.
Please consider immediately amending your Orders to move businesses and activities identified earlier in this letter from Stage 3 to Stage 2, where supported by local data and appropriate mitigation measures. Such action will allow for more individuals and businesses in the City of Chico and Butte County to begin a phased-in return to work, with appropriate mitigations in place to protect the public. High-risk individuals will be requested to remain at home and vigilant. Individuals who are not high-risk, but are still fearful, can self-determine if they want to participate in local services and activities and may always choose to stay home. While businesses will have to modify operations to comply with necessary mitigation measures, the private and public sectors are up to the challenge in order to provide some economic relief while continuing to keep cases low.

Butte County, the City of Chico and the other four local jurisdictions, and the region’s private, public, non-profit, and faith-based partners have come together to create Butte County’s plan for reopening, which has been submitted to the State with the Health Officer’s attestation that we meet the criteria as defined by Dr. Angell. We look forward to your swift action to modify your Orders in such a way that allows local authorities to determine the best path forward for our unique situations.

The University Impact.

Additionally, the City of Chico has real concern over the potential budgetary reductions being recommended to a key State partner within our City, Chico State University. With the recommended budgetary reductions moving forward for the entire Cal State system, a destination campus like Chico State, is more detrimentally impacted than other campuses that have closer proximity to ensure the economic sustainability of the region. The City of Chico would therefore request further consideration be given to authorizing such rural campuses supplemental funding and/or a clearer path forward toward re-opening campus more fully in order to spur economic activity to enable the City and region to survive. The City is currently engaging in discussions with Chico State President Hutchinson to see what a path forward might look like to re-open the campus safely, with a preeminent focus being on the health and safety of the community and students, but while finding a prudent path to keep the economic viability and sustainability of the region in focus.

In closing, thank you again for your leadership as the pandemic unfolded and know that we are here to help you and the State be successful as we collectively lessen restrictions with appropriate safety measures, to protect our State and its residents from other, very real public health and safety threats besides the virus. Our Public Health Officer, Dr. Andy Miller amiller@buttecounty.net, and our City Manager, Mark Orme mark.orme@chicoca.gov, are available if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ann Schwab, Mayor
City of Chico

cc: Senator Jim Nielsen
    Assemblymember James Gallagher
    Assemblymember Megan Dahle
    Chancellor Timothy White
    President Gayle Hutchinson
    Shari McCracken, Butte County CAO
    Dr. Andy Miller, City of Chico and Butte County Health Officer