

**JEFF GOLDEN**  
**STATE SENATOR**  
DISTRICT 3



## OREGON STATE SENATE

Dear ---

If you're reading this email you probably contacted my office with views on when and how Oregon's economy should open back up. This is a mass response, and I hope you'll excuse it; I wanted to give this question, perhaps the most important and complex I've faced in public life, a lot of thought and a careful answer, and then let you all have it at the same time.

My incoming mail is divided about equally between people who want businesses and activities opened back up right now, or very soon, and people who want Oregon to stay the current course for a while longer. The stronger feelings seem to come from people who want thorough re-opening now. As it happens, [a new survey of about 1000 random Oregonians](#) shows strong majority support for continuing the stay-at-home practices. What surprised some people was that the levels of stay-at-home support were almost the same in rural and urban Oregon, among families that had and hadn't experienced job loss, and among Republicans and Democrats.

But no survey cancels out the urgent concerns I've heard. Whether you have a small business barely clinging to survival, have lost a job that may or may not come back, wonder if you can hang on to your house or rental, have kids missing out on the opportunities kids need, are watching retirement savings dwindle, can't access your favorite places, worry about your own isolation or that of someone you love, the stakes are huge and growing. We're craving *relief*, and with the curve flattening out—relatively few new cases and no deaths in Jackson County—it's natural to wonder why we can't get it right away.

We'll soon get some. Last week a three-stage statewide plan came out that will ease restrictions on outdoor areas and some businesses, probably in the next week or two. It takes a regional approach that opens certain less-populated parts of Oregon earlier than urban areas. Details will be coming soon.

All in all, Oregon's heading for a middle-ground approach compared to other states. Some are keeping all their doors closed at least through May. Others aren't waiting; Georgia just told a variety of businesses, including some that can't really maintain social distancing—gyms, massage and tattoo parlors—to open their doors. As a result, May will be a month of national experiment: different policies in different states are going to show different results, which should help fill in critical gaps in our understanding of this disease.

Those gaps make these high-stake decisions brutally hard. One key example: some who want Oregon opened now deeply question the hopes they're hearing about a future coronavirus vaccine. They say we'll get through this after massive numbers of people have been infected and then have immunity from re-infection—as we collectively develop “herd immunity”—and the virus can't spread to new victims. Perhaps. But at this moment scientists, who've seen viruses behave very differently, are debating whether COVID-19 does in fact give strong immunity to most of those who contract it, and if so, how reliably and for how long. And as many vaccine skeptics have pointed out, the real-world experience of herd immunity hasn't always followed predictions. That's a lot more unknowns than you'd want before choosing a strategy that lets the infection spread until it can't find more victims.

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That's just one way that our COVID-19 knowledge is thinner than we need. The shortfalls in testing—in terms of both availability and reliability—is another. Add to that the high percentage of virus carriers who show no symptoms (which adds risk to opening schools or individual counties), a longer incubation period than many viruses, and what seems to be the tenacity of the virus to stay infectious on some surfaces, and you end up with decisions that no informed person can call obvious or simple.

I've received some comments reflecting the President's view that "we can't have the cure be worse than the problem." President Trump is talking about a tug-of-war between valuing public health and economic vitality. But that might not be the choice we're facing. The history of pandemics suggests that instead of broadening immunity, a full-steam-ahead approach could instead set us up for a second, much deadlier spike that devastates our health *and* our economy. I don't know how likely that is and I doubt that anyone does. However, at this point, the notion that rapidly opening up for business will be good for jobs and the economy is a prediction, not a fact.

None of this changes the reality that some who've contacted me are facing the hardest challenges of their lives. For those who've always relied on themselves to provide for their families, it must be painful to wait at home for who-knows-how-long when there's so little visible evidence of disease in our community. People deeply devoted to their kids' education and opportunities might feel the same way. And too many people are getting close to the edge of hunger and homelessness; federal aid dollars haven't reached them, and it may not be clear when they will. It would be strange if people WEREN'T pushing for a return to predictable, somewhat-normal life.

So what's the best course right now, in the closing days of April? After absorbing the best material I can find, keeping tabs on the infection's course in other places, and weighing all I've heard from constituents, my judgment says to move forward with plenty of caution. I'll monitor the roll-out of Oregon's three-phase plan, paying special attention to what it looks like in the Rogue Valley. I'll comb through the specifics of the proposal that Jackson County is drafting to expand the state's plan with an eye towards supporting those that pass muster with public health officials. And I'll watch what happens in other states that are re-opening more slowly or quickly than Oregon to see if and how we should change course. What I won't do is follow the urgings of some to ask the Governor to follow the aggressive blunt-force lead of states like Georgia. I can't believe that's the smartest course for us right now.

With all we don't know, here's something we do: the circumstances of this pandemic are going to change. We will learn more about how this virus spreads, how much immunity it creates, what kind of distancing is effective, and what activities can and can't prevent it. What you deserve from all of us in government is that we track these changes and stay open to adjusting to what we learn. That's what I'll keep striving to do.

In the meantime, if you have a pressing problem that I might be able to ease, I want to hear about it, especially if a state agency is involved. The unbearably frustrating problem this past month has been gridlock at the Oregon Employment Department, which has received over twenty times more unemployment claims per week than the past record-high. With the current hiring of hundreds of new claims-processing staff, the worst of that should be behind us. We hope that's also true of problems accessing federal relief dollars; I'd like to hear any first-hand experience you may have in that area. I also think it's important to insist to our members of Congress that they make sure that future aid packages are designed for people who need it the most rather than organizations with the most powerful connections.

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But people pushing for quick re-opening don't really want government checks. They want to go back to work and regain the freedom of movement that's always been ours. Almost everyone wants that. Let's re-open Oregon in well-designed ways that strictly minimize chances for a COVID-19 rebound that sets back the clock to early March (or worse) and wastes the efforts and costs we've shouldered in the last few weeks. That process will begin very soon and steadily continue, if we're careful, to restore what's great about living in Southern Oregon.

Sincere thanks for all you've done to slow the pandemic in our county, for your patience with the painful uncertainties it's brought us, and for looking out for others.

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