

From: Katie Button <katie@kbr.email>
Sent: 1/21/2021 5:55:27 PM
To: Brownie W. Newman
Cc: Esther Manheimer, sheneikasmith@avlcouncil.com, sandrakilgore@avlcouncil.com, antanettemosley@avlcouncil.com, kimroney@avlcouncil.com, sageturner@avlcouncil.com, gwenwisler@avlcouncil.com,
Subject: Re: Urgent Message from Independent Restaurants to the County Commission

Brownie, Å

Thank you for your response. Å I do want to share my thoughts on some of the things Å that you have shared so that I can clarify my perspective to all of you in advance of your meeting on Tuesday. Å To date, I have not seen any community data showing that our restaurants when operating at 50% capacity are a primary cause of spread in our community. Å If that data exists, I would LOVE to see it. Å If there is no such data, which is what I have heard from Mackensy Lunsford with the Citizen Times, then I firmly stand by my statements. Å The decision that the County Commission made has targeted our independent restaurants as the ONLY way to further curb spread in our community. Å Without specific data linking the spread to restaurants, I think the county commission's decision is an abuse of their power and unfairly targets one industry, leading to the temporary closure of MANY independent restaurants in Buncombe County. Å I want to be sure you understand that when a restaurant decides to temporarily close, it is because they know that if they do NOT temporarily close they will NEVER be able to reopen again; temporary closure is usually the last resort that a restaurant will try before they are forced to permanent closure. Å This growing list of temporarily closed restaurants is a foreshadow of the permanent closures coming due to the 30% county mandate. Å

So, when I said that the statement that you made was anecdotal, meaning lacking any real evidence, it is because I have not seen ANY community data about the spread in restaurants operating at 50% capacity. Å When I said the statement was also flippant, it Å is because it caused a TARGETED heavy handed decision by the County Commission to restrict ONE industry, leading to the inevitable permanent damage of those businesses and their workers. Å It is the loss of businesses and sending workers out on unemployment that the statement has caused that I deem flippant. Å

When the governor mandated the 10pm curfew and 9pm end of alcohol sales we saw a LARGE reduction in our business. It is highly likely that the governor's mandate alone began over time to drive down cases in the region, Å I am sure there are measurements for how long it Å takes to see the results of a restriction, is it a month? Six weeks? Eight weeks? I don't know, Å but I'm sure someone has that answer. Å The county targeting one industry before seeing the impact of the governor's mandate is another example of the problem with this decision. Since there is no data, you cannot say that targeting restaurants above and beyond the governor's orders was NECESSARY. And if it wasn't necessary, then it is doing FAR more damage than the good it was intended to do. Å Å

I understand that you all are in a VERY difficult situation. Å Daily, we deal with ensuring safety of our staff and our guests and it is a really challenging tight-rope to walk, but one we are proud to say that we are doing well. I urge you and all of the commissioners that now more than ever, we need understanding among one another. Å If there is anything in my statements that sparks a new thought or perspective that you didn't have before, it is welcomed! It is what discourse is meant to do. Å Please do not for the sake of the small businesses in this community stand by something that you cannot prove with real data that it is necessary and worth the damage that it is doing. Å

Regards,

Katie Button
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CEO
828-215-8085
KATIE BUTTON
RESTAURANTS
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On Thu, Jan 21, 2021 at 12:51 PM Brownie W. Newman <Brownie.Newman@buncombecounty.org> wrote:
Katie,

Thank you for taking time to participate in public comment during the Commission meeting this week. As we discussed at the meeting, the recommendation of the county's public health officials is to review the rates of people being hospitalized from Covid sickness at the beginning of next week on Monday, January 25, which is four days from now. If the rates of people being hospitalized and the rates of positive cases in the community continues to be stable or improve, as we have seen over the past week, the intent is to lift the local policy on indoor dining and to revert to the North Carolina policy. Å

Our largest concern throughout the pandemic has been to prevent our hospital from being completely overwhelmed by sick Covid patients. In December and early January we were on a definite trajectory of the hospital being overwhelmed. The perspective of doctors and nurses who work at Mission is that, frankly, it was overwhelmed in December and early January and the result is that very sick people could not be adequately cared for. Å

Although the amount of Covid sickness in our community remains extremely high, fortunately, we have seen a stabilization and slight reduction in the number of people hospitalized, and in the rates of positive tests, over the past two weeks. As stated above, if those metrics continue this week, our intent is to revert to the state policy next week. Å

I understand that these policies create real hardship for local businesses, and I truly regret that. The county is planning to provide additional financial support for local businesses impacted by Covid. We are holding a special meeting on Tuesday, January 25 to hold the necessary public hearing and appropriate the funds. I recognize that, in the big scheme of things, the amount of funds we have available to support local businesses is very small compared to the financial challenges so many are facing, but we want to do what we can. Å

I realize this is an area where we will have to agree to disagree, but wanted to respond to your comment about how a commissioner stated that if a person who has contracted Covid eats at an indoor dining facility, others who are seated at the same table or nearby tables are likely to contract Covid. This statement was from me, as you know. You describe the comment as flippant, but from what we have learned this year, I stand by it. I believe a person with Covid is likely to infect the other persons sitting at the same table as them, who are often from different households, once they have removed their masks to eat and drink, oftentimes for prolonged periods of time. In many indoor settings, they are also likely to infect people sitting at other tables in the same room, depending on the air circulation within the building. Å

Unfortunately, this is likely to become even more so the case as new, significantly more contagious variants of Covid become common throughout our country and, as is expected, within our community, within a matter of weeks.

As the supply of vaccines being sent to our community increases we will be able to scale up the number of vaccinations administered each week and be able to vaccinate a high percentage of residents in the coming months, which will end the pandemic. Our goal is to assure that all vaccines shipped to our community can be rapidly and efficiently administered to residents who want them, and the Commission appropriated an additional \$1 million at our meeting this week to assure the resources are there to build out this capacity. Å

Thanks again for reaching out Katie. Hoping for brighter days to come for everyone struggling through this tough time. Please feel free to contact me anytime.

Sincerely,

Brownie Newman

On Jan 21, 2021, at 10:33 AM, Katie Button <katie@kbr.email> wrote:

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First of all, I would like to thank the County Commission for giving me the space and time to speak at their last meeting. It was the first time I have done so, and there is definitely a learning curve associated with the virtual call in. I also recognize that it is probably difficult to keep track of all of the points that I was trying to make in such a short time. So, in advance of your meeting this Tuesday January 26th, I wanted to send over the transcript of my comments. I think that the main point can be summarized best in my concluding paragraph, but please I hope you will take the time to read my thoughts in their entirety.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Independent restaurants in Buncombe County are being wiped out. Over Easy Cafe, Calypso, Rezaz, Rise Above Deli, Rustic Grape, Korean House and more are **permanently closed**.

Plus, almost 20 more, including El Gallo, Jargon, Chiesa, Smoky Park Supper Club, Copper Crown, The Cantina, Battery Park Book Exchange, Rosetta's, Zambra's these are all temporarily closed, with more following suit.

These temporary closures occurred after the announcement of the county's stringent 30% capacity mandate. And why?

Independent Restaurants are hemorrhaging money and laying off employees. Most of us are losing thousands of dollars every day. That's the money that would be going to our 100% locally-based workforce and to our vendors - many of which are local farmers and purveyors. Migrating to takeout, setting up tables outside, delivery - these are NOT solutions. We lose profit margin on takeout materials, heaters, tents, rentals and delivery partner commission.

Meanwhile, Independent Restaurants across the state are operating safely at 50% capacity per the state mandates.

When the Governor's 10 pm closure mandate went into effect we saw our already struggling businesses that were down over 50% in revenue, drop another 20%. Then, less than 2 weeks later, the County further restricted our capacity to 30% - a move that is hammering a nail in the coffin of independent restaurants in this community and causing widespread confusion. I ask you, what drove this decision? No specific data has been shared that supports the restriction.

Again, restaurants across the state are operating safely at 50%.

From my perspective, the permanent loss of independent businesses, well-paying jobs, and access to benefits and health insurance that are a result of this measure lands squarely on the Buncombe County Commission's shoulders.

The County Commission maintains that, "The reality is that if someone with COVID goes into an indoor restaurant to eat, they are highly likely to infect those around them while their mask is off." A quote from a county commissioner. This assertion is flippant, and anecdotal at best.

We've seen no data that restaurants in Buncombe County are a primary source of COVID-19 spread in our community.

Or even that transmission rates in restaurants are higher in our community than other retail or grocery settings. And personally, Independent Restaurants have experienced the opposite - when things are in our control, we CAN and DO operate with our guests and employees safety and wellbeing as our top priority. Unfortunately, the County Commission did not give Independent Restaurants the opportunity to perform safely with the governor's recent restrictions before instituting the more stringent mandate - **we need that chance now.**

Buncombe County is the only one of North Carolina's 100 counties unfairly targeting its Independent Restaurants.

We are asking the County Commission to reconsider the 30% capacity mandate. We must fall in line with the Governor's mandates so that Independent Restaurants in Buncombe County have a fighting chance of survival.

Regards,

Katie Button
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CEO
828-215-8085

KATIE BUTTON
RESTAURANTS

CURATE
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