

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, May 29, 2020, Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: Good morning. So as you know, I'm recommending to the Board of Health and the County Council that we apply to the state for an exception and ability to move on to phase two, the safe start program. And I have to say Governor Inslee has led us to really good place. Our case counts have been dropping for some time, we managed to flatten the curve. We avoided exceeding the capacity of our healthcare system, and so a pretty bad situation made better as best as we could. So kudos to everybody so far for really flattening that curve and getting us here today. So, but the residents of the county as you know have paid a steep price, the residents of the state and the country and really the world. Many people are hurting. Some have lost loved ones. Others are out of work and worried about how to pay their bills. So it's really important that we keep progressing through this situation and move on to the next phase.

So the one thing that's really vitally important that, as we do move towards Phase two, is that people remember that we have to maintain all those precautions that we've had in place. Stay at home if you can, as much as you can. Proper social distancing. Sanitation. All those things are even more important now as we start to open up a little bit. We, we are not out of this yet. The virus is not gone and will not be for some time. So those precautions are very critical.

So we're able to move to this next phase, I believe, because just two days ago the County Council fully authorized spending our CARES Act dollars so we can now assure the state that we have adequate PPE, both on hand and in the pipeline. We have a quarantine site that is funded through the rest of this year, contact tracing through the health district and testing through the Health District is adequate, and will meet the standard, I believe. And we believe that the hospital capacity in the county is adequate. So we check all the boxes. Our case counts have been coming down for some time. This past week they've been hovering between 11 and 13. The number that the state set as a goal was really 10 per hundred thousand. We're at 11 to 13. We're very, very close, been trending in the right direction for well over a month now. So we believe that our application for an exception will be accepted. So we really, again, need to avoid another spike after this. I know that we need to expect from ourselves and our families and friends that we just follow precautions, keep moving forward, keep moving safely. And our businesses I think are ready for this. The June 1 date had been on everybody's minds for the move into phase two. So I know that a lot of the small businesses and restaurants that will be able to open at least partially have precautions in place and I would urge everybody to frequent those businesses that are following the precautions and safety recommendations.

So I know people are suffering. We're trying to move forward as quickly as we can, while recognizing the serious nature of the virus. And you know, it's a balancing act. There's no easy path through this. But again, I think the governor and our Board of Health and our health officer here in Snohomish County have just done a wonderful job, along with our residents who have done really the hard work and will have to in the future. The success of moving into phase two really depends on the goodwill of our citizens and them following through with those safety precautions that I already mentioned, so credit to our residents. Let's, I think we're going to be successful in this to get to phase two and I'm looking very much forward to that.

So with that I'll turn it over to Dr. Spitters.

Dr. Chris Spitters: Okay. Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much, executive Somers, and I want to thank you and the county council for your leadership and for affording the

resources from the CARES Act to the health district to forward these very activities you've been talking about related to containment of transmission as we move forward, which I am fully in accord with us submitting that application for variance. And as was mentioned earlier we'll be meeting with our Board of Health later this morning, immediately following this briefing, to have that discussion and for me, in part, for me to deliver that recommendation that we, that the board does approve a resolution for us to move forward with the application.

As Executive Somers covered, we really do feel well equipped in terms of health care system capacity, personal protective equipment, contact tracing, case investigations, and also the epidemiologic and data monitoring aspects that are necessary for us to move forward with reasonable anticipation of success. And so I share executive Somers' optimism and also want to reiterate the urging that as, assuming that this goes this goes as hoped for and we find ourselves in Phase 2, that is a transitional step to increased activity, some economic, some social, some recreational. But by and large for the well being of us all it's important to adhere to the safety guidelines that we've continually communicated. Continue to work to limit your number of contacts, wear face covering when out in public. And, you know, remember that while we're opening things up a little bit, that overall effort to limit transmission of the virus is needed, and we can't do it alone, we need, we need your help not only by following those measures, but also if you're, if you happen to be someone who is contacted by public health through a contact investigation is to please be responsive as quickly as possible and cooperate with the efforts. They're completely confidential and it's really geared toward protecting not only the health of the individual, but all of us around.

One brief topic I just want to cover in a little bit of greater detail because I think there's, there's a lot of numbers mentioned around the case incidence criterion for moving into phase two. And so I just wanted to go over that a little bit so that as you, as you read our information going forward you feel stronger in interpreting that. So first is, again, as executive Somers mentioned, the guideline threshold for moving forward is 10 cases per hundred thousand residents over, collectively, over a 14 day period. In terms of number of cases that translates into about 80 cases over a two week period. Over the most recently measured two week period, which was last week and the week before, we had about 240 cases. If we extrapolate the current week out until next week, then at the end of next week if we look back and everything continues stably as it has for the past six days, we have cut that down by about a third down to about 160 or double the target number. So those are the numbers of cases that apply that criterion. Sometimes you may see a figure like a graph or a table or just text in our materials or in someone else's coverage of our situation mentioning a rate, and that rate expresses the number of cases per hundred thousand over that 14 day period, as I mentioned, without translating it to a specific number for our county. And so that target rate again is 10. Currently over the preceding two week period we were 29 or roughly 30 cases per hundred thousand. So again, just to reiterate that, make sure when you're comparing our situation to the, to our future performance as well as to the guideline thresholds, make sure you're keeping apples with apples and oranges with oranges in terms of if we're talking about numbers of cases or rates because if you get them mixed up you might get confused and think that we're either far behind the goal or a way out in front of it. So, and we're happy to take questions about that going forward any time.

The application itself for the variance is currently in its final stages of development, we're sharing the key elements of that with the board and the current version of that package will be

posted on our website shortly and updates for case counts and that variance application will be added to the website later this afternoon and ongoing through the coming week as things evolve. So that's all for me today.

Dave Somers: Emmett, you want to go ahead

Emmett Heath: Sure, happy to. First of all, executive Somers, thank you for inviting us to participate. I want to start out by reminding that at a federal, state, and local level, public transportation is identified as part of the nation's critical infrastructure. We're also identified at all of those levels as providing an essential service in the community. That said, we have about 1,000 employees including full time contractors providing those essential services. And about two thirds of those employees have been reporting to work, either at our bases or working in the field on a regular basis. So right off the top, I want to express my gratitude to all of those people for voluntarily continuing to come to work and allowing us to continue to provide those essential community services. So a shout out to all my colleagues.

Our ridership was dramatically impacted by the virus and the shutdown of the economy. We experienced almost immediately a 70% reduction in our ridership, about 95% reduction on trips commuting south and 70% overall. As a result, we reduced our service levels. We're now operating our services at a level of about 70% of pre-COVID levels. Throughout the entire event we have tried to keep everyone focused on a goal of safety, keeping our employees safe, keeping their family safe when they return home, keeping our riders safe, and keeping members of the community safe as well. Also want to give a shout out to very close partners of ours in this event, notably Dr. Spitters, the Snohomish health district has been a fantastic partner throughout. We're working closely with the Department of emergency management. We have embedded staff working with them and are in communication on a daily basis. Those have been great partnerships.

I want to talk a little bit about the precautions we're taking to keep people safe on our services. Those precautions include daily disinfection of all of our buses and bases and transit facilities. Early on we also suspended the collection of fares. We collect fares at the front door, that meant boarding passengers would be in close proximity to a coach, the coach operator. So we suspended fares, we closed the front door, we asked our patrons to board either through the middle or rear door. Then we also closed off the front 10 feet of the passenger compartment on every bus so every coach operator was isolated from public contact. We've also closed off about 50% of the seats on all of our buses. This is to make it possible for our passengers to maintain social distancing guidelines. And we, like other jurisdictions throughout Central Puget Sound, have very, very strongly encouraged all of our passengers to wear face coverings anytime they're using our services. Our drivers are provided with a full array of personal protective equipment, masks, gloves, sanitizer, and at this point we have, at current rates of consumption, we have multiple years of personal protective equipment in stock to keep our services supported throughout the rest of this event. And again, throughout, the primary goal is safety of our, our employees, their families, our customers and people in the community.

I want to shift briefly to financial impact. We, of course, we knew there would be a next recession. We didn't know what would cause it. We didn't know how severe it would be or how long it would last. We now know two out of those three or, excuse me, one out of those three. How severe and how long it will last are unknown, but we knew it was coming so we were very well prepared financially moving into this event. Nevertheless, our primary source of revenue is

sales tax. Recent reports from the State Department of Revenue indicate that sales tax receipts in the month of May, compared to the same month a year ago, were down 24%. About 11% of our operating revenues come from fares and we have not been collecting any fares at all. So the losses to our revenues in 2020 at this point are estimated to be approaching \$50 million. I want to say another shout out to our congressional delegation in Washington D.C. They were very well informed about the essential nature of our business. They were great advocates. And in the CARES act, we were fortunate to have a portion of that stimulus funding trickle down directly to Community Transit.

Looking ahead, we have a third party contractor that is now surveying our customers to find out how they feel about using public transportation and what they would need to see to feel safe coming back and using our services in future phases. We do plan on restoring some of our services. We're now at 70%, we're targeting a new service plan that would put our service at about 85% from now probably through March of 2021. We're also planning to restore the collection of fares on our Swift lines. We're planning to begin collecting fares again this coming Monday. We have not made a final decision for the rest of our system, but we expect to restore the collection of fares on the rest of the system fairly soon.

And there are several other things we've been doing that are trying to help out just generally in the community. One, for example, several of the routes that we operate operate within walking distance of food bank and shelters. We've also worked with the County Emergency Coordination Center to develop a page on our website that provides information on where people in the community can connect to housing and food sources. We've also partnered recently with other agencies in Snohomish County to reach out to people experiencing housing insecurity. We've had a task force making direct contact and providing hygiene kits, including face coverings and hand sanitizers and information and support to people who are continuing to experience that housing insecurity during this event.

Our focus remains on safety. We're anxious to see customers return to our system, we believe we'll be able to do that in a safe manner and looking forward to supporting the executive and others in moving into subsequent phases of the recovery. Those are my comments. Thank you.

Dave Somers: Thank you Emmett. And the first question is for me. How closely has the discussion about moving to phase two included the governor's office and department of health and how long has the council and myself been in these discussions, or was this something the county decided and let Inslee's office know about the plans. So on Tuesday morning we had a call with the governor's office that included King and Pierce counties and Everett, Seattle and Tacoma also. And I indicated my desire and belief that we needed to start moving forward in Snohomish County, that we were getting very close to the numbers in my estimation. But we hadn't really made that decision at that point. But I strongly indicated that we wanted head in that direction. And one of the reasons we had it on that call is because we've been very much in lockstep with King County and Seattle and Pierce County and Tacoma, but it really became obvious to me that Snohomish County is a county of 850,000 people. Several million in King County. Snohomish County doesn't really have a densely packed city like Seattle or even Bellevue or Redmond, so our case is a little bit different, much like some of the eastern Washington or coastal communities are different than, than we are. So it became clear to me that at some point we were probably going to be ready to go forward sooner than King County, so that discussion became, was had on Tuesday. Then on Wednesday the County Council fully released the \$143 million of CARES Act money that we got from Congress. Thank you very

much. It's critical to this plan. But once that was authorized, we had the ability to make assurances to the state that we would have adequate PPE on hand. We had funded contact tracing and testing. The quarantine center, as I mentioned, would be funded through the end of the year. So all those final pieces and the boxes that we needed to check for the state were made possible because that CARES act funding was put forward. So Wednesday was a milestone. At that point, we started talking with the Council about moving forward, and I do know the Health District, I talked with Dr. Spitters on Tuesday, also, they have been preparing the application for some time. We knew at some point we would be getting ready. So these final pieces falling into place really sort of moved us forward. We have been constant, in constant contact with governor's office daily, multiple times daily. They know it's coming. They have not given us any sure assurances, they did say submit a good application and we will give it serious review and we intend on doing that.

So the next question is both for Dr. Spitters and myself. If the application is not completed yet, when will it be finished and what time you expect to turn it in. Has the Department of Health Secretary indicated if a decision will be made today, tonight, or are you anticipating action Monday? Do you want to start on that or do you want me to?

Chris Spitters: Certainly. Maybe I'll say what I know and you can add to that. So as executive Somers mentioned, we've been working on, as soon as the guidance came out with, it makes sense to be prepared. So we started drafting a response based on what information we had available at the time. And we're near culminating that, just some final reviews and analyzing data. But I'd say it's 97% done and, you know, we're just trying to, as the executive Somers said, submit a good product for them to consider. And I cannot speak to the timeline which the, the department or the governor's office would respond. We're just going to deliver them our best product, the best case we can, and then it's in their hands from there.

Dave Somers: I'll just say that in past decisions they have moved fairly quickly, within a day or several days. It's my recommendation that we submit actually Monday morning and I'm hopeful we'll do that but we expect a decision fairly quickly.

I guess, next one is for Dr. Spitters. From a scientific point of view is moving to Phase two before meeting the state's criteria, what would happen if this was a scientific decision and didn't include political pressures?

Chris Spitters: Well, we're, I'm in accord with executive Somers that although our, for instance, that case incidence figure is not quite where the state's criterion is set, looking holistically at our situation and the elements of the of the variance, I think the overall picture is very favorable to us being optimistic about this going well. And that's, that's, it's that summary judgment about what's going on that makes me feel confident and optimistic that we're making the right move. It's a lot like taking care of a patient. It's not one single test result that we make a diagnosis or plan on it's, you know, what the patient says, what we find when we examine the patient, the laboratory results, the radiology results. And so, in this situation, it's a constellation of features that we've discussed, the case incidence, healthcare system capacity, public health's capacity to do suppression and containment, availability of personal protective equipment. I think that although we may not have a bright green light on every indicator, we're well positioned to do well going forward and suppress transmission and have a successful venture into phase two.

Dave Somers: Another question for Dr. Spitters. The governor has been hinting at a new face covering policy. You said in April that requiring face coverings in the county is a possibility. Do you anticipate mandating masks in public? And I'll say a word, too, when you're done.

Chris Spitters: Again, the most important thing I think is that we all use face coverings when out in public. And I think that that really does need to be a new social norm for the, the period of time that we're under this, the shadow of COVID-19. I think anything we can do to suppress transmission, and face coverings have been demonstrated to be effective in that, in helping prevent transmission from other people, especially by those who don't know that they have the infection yet or who will have no symptoms at all. It's very important. How we get there, how we achieve that, the adoption of this as a social norm may vary from place to place and time to time. I would not be opposed to, you know, if the governor were to order such I would encourage all Snohomish County residents to follow that order, and we've had discussions about considering the same locally, and I think that's still on the table. And I think I'll leave it at that for this moment, maybe executive Somers, you have more to say.

Dave Somers: Yeah, I'll just add that Dr. Spitters and myself have been in conversation about this topic for some time. We want to be in agreement when we move forward. I know Thurston County I believe yesterday passed a new face covering policy. The governor's office was considering one. There is a directive in place in King County. So we're closely looking at that. The important thing as we move forward into phase two is that these protective measures are in place and people are taking them seriously. So we're trying to make sure that the action we take encourages that to the maximum extent possible. There's a good part of the population that doesn't want to be told what to do. But there's also, our businesses need some ability to say, if they can, to say no if somebody is coming in without a face covering to really ask those customers not to come in. So it's really kind of a balancing act and we'll be, I think, making some decisions on that in just the next few days, because I believe it's an important question that people would like some guidance on.

So the next one for Dr. Spitters. Should the county move to phase two, what are the recommendations for those people 60 and over and others originally considered high risk.

Chris Spitters: Right, so vulnerable populations, those over age 60, people with chronic diseases of the heart, lung kidney, diabetes are at increased risk of severe disease, hospitalization, and even death due to COVID-19. Consequently, we will still recommend that they try to maximize their social distancing to the extent available that they're able to. Minimize trips out of the home. And that that part of our regime for community wide prevention of COVID-19 remains unchanged. We really want those folks protecting themselves and also the people around them, continuing to be mindful about who they're being with so that they don't expose those vulnerable people when they come back home. So again it just speaks to what executive Somers opened with. Wherever we go from here as we move ahead, continued social distancing and adherence to these basic recommendations are standing and are not changed by this, by what phase we're in.

Dave Somers: And I know you have to go in a minute, Dr. Spitters, but this question. Could you please expand on the numbers you provided earlier in reference to meeting the 10 cases per hundred thousand criteria for phase two? You said something about 240 cases over the last two weeks. Anyways, a clarification question.

Chris Spitters: Yes. Sure. Certainly. So yes, I did say 240 cases total over the past two weeks in Snohomish County, last week and the week before. You divide that among the 850,000 residents and you get roughly 30 cases per hundred thousand per 14 day period. So that's the difference. The number was 240, the rate was 30. When we look at the target, the number for us is 80 and the rate associated with that is 10. So, hope that helps clarify.

Dave Somers: So, is it correct doctor that over this past week we've been hovering around 11 to 13 cases a day? So if you extrapolate that forward, that's I think that's the hopeful indicator we're relying on.

Chris Spitters: By all means. Extrapolating this week forward another week, we would have a two week total at the end of next week of 150, 160 cases. And that corresponds to a 14 day rate per hundred thousand of, you know, 10 to 11. So again, that puts us very close to that target. And again, I just think, overall, it just speaks to, you know, we're very close. And we do have the staffing, policies and protocols in place to then contain that number of cases, reach out to them, make sure they're isolated, reach out to their contacts, make sure they're quarantined, and try to prevent further spread from those recently exposed contacts.

Dave Somers: So the last question, when the county moves to phase two, how will the county be able to ensure places like salons, restaurants are operating with proper protocols such as reduced capacity, facemasks, etc. on an ongoing basis? And I would like to start on that in that I'm going to be asking our residents to really support those businesses that are doing the right thing. And if they're not doing the right thing, take your own health into account and don't frequent those establishments and frankly, if somebody is blatantly violating the rules, say restaurants are full capacity, there are actions that can be taken either locally or by the state. We know that there's been some action by the state regarding the barber in the city of Snohomish. So there's a number of enforcement tools. But at the end of the day, the success of this is really going to rely on our residents doing the smart thing, doing the right thing and these establishments need customers and frankly we're just asking everybody to self enforce and encourage everybody to do the right thing. Dr. Spitters, you want to add anything to that?

Chris Spitters: Yes. So, you know, these are, these are thousands of enterprises throughout the county and monitoring the behavior of each and every one of them is going to be, it's beyond our capacity. It's beyond the government's capacity to monitor every single one of those. And it really speaks to the importance of proprietors taking responsibility to, you know, think of the community, and then customers want to be safe. We all want to be safe. And I think that, that like executive Somers said, patronizing those enterprises that you feel comfortable and safe patronizing, I encourage you to do that. And for your health and the health of people around you, I would discourage all of us from patronizing a place that's not following the guidelines for safety, because even if you don't get severely sick as a result of exposure in that setting, someone that you expose later might do so. So it really does speak to the important importance of us all being on the same team and doing our best for our own self interest, that of our families, and most importantly, the broader community in this time.

Joint Information Center: Thank you all for joining us. This is Kari Bray in the Joint Information Center, and we are running a little over so I'm going to wrap us up kind of quick here. But once again, thank you for joining us and please stay tuned for future availabilities

Dave Somers: Thank you.

