

TRANSCRIPT: Snohomish County Response to COVID-19, September 22 Briefing

Executive Dave Somers: It's good to see you all. Just want to say that our numbers are trending in the right direction. I want to thank everybody, thank the public for taking protection measures seriously and we're headed in the right direction and so that's good news and we just have to keep that going.

And I want to talk a little bit about aerospace. As you know, Snohomish County and the Puget Sound are home to the largest aerospace employment and manufacturing cluster in the United States. And really the most important part of that cluster is Paine Field airport and Boeing Everett plant. And the Boeing plant is as you know their largest facility in the world, it's our number one employer, and it also has been our number one tourist attraction pre-COVID. So a study done January this year actually showed that the economic impact of Paine Field accounted for over 158,000 jobs and that's through the network and not just at Boeing but other suppliers and elsewhere, and almost \$60 billion in economic impact to the region. That is far and away the largest and highest economic impact of any airport in the state and if I remember right it's two or three times the economic impact of SeaTac. And this is all, of course, pre-COVID. Due to the COVID pandemic the aerospace and aviation industry are experiencing a huge decline in demand for their products and services and so we know they've been aggressively seeking to reduce costs and maximize efficiencies, which a lot of businesses are having to do worldwide so we are not alone in this. The potential consolidation of the 787 production line in South Carolina coupled with the plan to end production of the 747 in 2022 would have a significant impact on our economy both at the county level and beyond so we know the company is going to have to make decisions, dollars and cents decisions, to help them get through this. We totally understand that. Last week we launched a campaign, a public and private partnership to make the strongest case that we are in a long-term relationship with Boeing, we understand that, and we think we are a great place to do business and build airplanes. We've led the nation in aerospace in the past and innovation and the future of aerospace and advanced manufacturing we believe will remain here no matter what. So our region and our county's been working hard to build a gold standard for workforce development system for the aerospace industry and we also have a world class educational training system and training institutions and programs. So we have the infrastructure necessary to build the future and really want to benefit and build upon our natural environment and quality of life here. So our partnership with Boeing spans decades, over 50 years in Snohomish County, so we're going to work to make the partnership stronger, whatever Boeing's short-term decision. We want to keep Boeing in Snohomish County for at least another 50 years so we know a decision is going to have to be made in the short-term but we are very much looking at the long-term. So we're hoping for the best but planning for whatever outcome is announced. These are tough times for everybody. Seems like every day is a new surprise. But as elected officials that's why we're here is to help our communities through this, so families affected, the company and all the rest we can just send our best wishes and we're here to help as much as possible and we're going to focus on the long term.

So we are pleased to get the news yesterday about an FAA grant for \$5 million for Paine Field to help us renovate one of the primary taxiways so that is \$5 million for physical improvements at the airport, at Paine Field the county-owned airport. And this will really help us invest in that, Paine Field will remain vitally important into the future. We are extremely grateful to Senator Cantwell, Congressman Larsen, Senator Murray, Congresswoman DeBene, and our

partnership with the congressional delegation was really vital and they really stepped up after Paine Field was kind of left out of the CARES Act dollars, protection dollars, they really scrambled to help us get an investment into Paine Field.

So we are going to continue to work on our economic health and efforts to recover from COVID and we'll just persevere. So with that I'll hand it over to Dr. Spitters from the Snohomish Health District. Doctor.

Dr. Chris Spitters: Thank you Executive Somers and good morning everyone. We're very grateful for the clear air that I see outside my window following the much needed rain in recent days clearing away the wildfire smoke, so with that improvement the health district resumed testing operations last Friday and Saturday at our regular daily COVID testing site on Broadway in Everett. Testing is back to its regular schedule this week which is available on our website at snohd.org/testing. Speaking of our website, those of you who frequent the page for data updates might have noticed a refresh over the last few days. I'd like to take moment to walk you through a couple of the key pages on our website and briefly review the most recent data.

So I'm going to share a screen here with you. So hopefully now you are seeing our homepage here, at snohd.org. Across the top these are some usual icons to take you to places on the health district website for more information unrelated to COVID-19, also down here some categories of general activity. There's a banner that slides across the top covering three different avenues of COVID activity information, testing and influenza and COVID-19 information. And then you can either scroll down here to this green icon coronavirus information, or if you see it across the top you can click on it there and then you'll come to our COVID page. This is the new look, we have these icons to try to make it a little more user friendly for people visiting the website. First I want to take you to this case counts and data site. So we'll go there. We have three main buckets here. One is a brief summary of our local case counts, take a quick look at that. So this shows the total number of probable, excuse me, probable and confirmed cases cumulatively through yesterday. Here is a plot of number of cases per day. And then this is the smooth plot over time with that running two-week average. Which as you see we've come down just a touch further. Things seem to be flattening a little bit. I don't have a clear explanation for that. We got much lower after the first wave before we flattened out so I'm hoping that's just an aberration over time, maybe related to the Labor Day holiday, hard to tell. We haven't seen any increased case counts of any significant size and duration in any age group, so we'll just keep following that but hoping as Executive Somers said to stay to course, keep using the face coverings, keep up with the social distancing, limiting your gatherings, and otherwise following the safe start guidance to try to push these numbers down further to reduce transmission and put us in a better position to open up things like schools and the economy.

I'm going to then go back to that page and I'll just briefly show you these main sites off the data page. That middle icon is where you'll find our snapshot. If you click on this you'll get the full snapshot. Then if you scroll down there's previous snapshots and then this is the weekly report we put out most recently through yesterday. Then again back to that page. So we've looked at local case counts, snapshots and reports, and then this is the data dashboard. It takes a minute to load, but this is the state database where you can look at statewide figures, Snohomish County, or any county you wish and that will give you information on case counts, testing, hospital capacity, what have you. So then we'll go back, now we're back at the COVID homepage. A variety of other things but I wanted to next go to our testing information. So if we click on that icon we come to this banner with three items. This is our testing schedule you'll see

right here, here's a nice map showing where we're locations where Broadway's coming off interstate five. Here's that, and this is in the Everett school district parking lot between the Everett school district building and the Memorial Stadium. Next is the registration page where you can click on the registration process right here and you'll go through a questionnaire to line you up and get you an assigned and scheduled test. If for some reason you're unable to get tested at a convenient time or place through the health district testing you can go to this table which will show you information about where other places where testing is available as well as where language services are available and a contact phone number for that testing site. And then last on this banner at the top is if you have questions about whether you're eligible for testing through the health district you can take a look at this page. And those criteria have not changed.

So next I just wanted to talk a little bit more about travel testing. I'm going to stop sharing and come back to our main screen. About testing for travel. We have had a large number of people calling the health district asking about testing for travel or similar kinds of administrative needs for testing rather than health related needs. We are currently offering travel testing at our drive-thru locations but it's important to keep in mind two things. One, results average three to four business days. We cannot guarantee that you will be able to get your results in the timeframe required by your destination's parameters and our staff have rolled out a new process to provide proof of testing that individuals can use to show healthcare providers for travel-related needs. The other thing to keep in mind is if testing demand begins to exceed the supply of tests we have available then we might have to look at retreating from providing that kind of testing. But for the time being that is available. It's just important to remember that when you use the health district system for testing you really need to just go with the flow and get the results back as they come. We and the laboratory are doing the best we can however we cannot rush results to meet personal deadlines for medical procedures or for travel. There are other testing resources as I mentioned in Snohomish County as shown in that table that we highlighted, but their turnarounds may also fluctuate based on demand at the labs and demand at the testing locations. We also encourage checking with your insurance, your health insurance and being prepared for the possibility of having to pay out of pocket for the testing if it is for travel purposes other than for medical purposes. The health district testing is free but at other venues you may have to pay. I'd also like to remind everyone in this context that non-essential travel still isn't really recommended at this time as Snohomish County is in phase 2. If you do need to travel, please do your research first about any requirements at your destination regarding COVID-19. Many international locations either require a two-week quarantine or are completely off limits for people from the United States at this time. For those countries or states where you can travel, check with your destination about any necessary quarantine or pre-travel testing requirements and remember that travel requirements may change at any time. It's also possible on international travel, not to scare people out of traveling if they need to, but my family recently had to do this, if you go you have to be prepared that you may get stuck there and you may not be able to get back on the timeline you had originally hoped or planned for. So in that light always remember asking about cancelations or refunds.

Countless plans have already been disrupted and we're not through this pandemic yet. So if you book a vacation even months in advance, be flexible and understand that you may have to cancel or drastically modify those plans. We know there are people who do have travel plans and there are people who have essential reasons to travel related to their work or a family emergency, but otherwise the health district would suggest that now is not a good time for a

vacation that takes you far from home and instead we encourage you to explore the great places that Snohomish County has to offer, with a face mask, of course.

So with that I'll turn it back over to Executive Somers.

Dave Somers: Thank you doctor. I do not see any questions in chat yet. Are there any questions? We may have finally answered them all. Oh here we go. Are there any lessons learned from this second surge of cases, knowing waves of virus activity are inevitable? Doctor?

Chris Spitters: Well I think that's the, maybe the first lesson is the second clause of your question which is that until we arrive at a state with more widespread immunity, at this time most likely to be delivered by a vaccine over the course of the next 9 to 15 months if things go well as planned, that it looks like it would be inevitable that we're going to bump into transient increases in cases and then we kind of buckle down a little bit more and try to bring that under control. So I think that's the first lesson. Let's look back at the first two waves. The first wave primarily affected elderly folks, not exclusively but certainly in the severe end, especially those living in long-term care facilities. Second wave was more younger adults in the wake of us moving into phase 2 and I think both bringing more people out into the workplace where they're working with others or working with customers that increase the number of interactions and carry the risk of transmission. Also I think that a lesson, an anecdotal lesson we got from, well not anecdotal but multiple vignettes over time that getting together in groups larger than recommended does carry a risk of transmission. And it's not always a huge group. You'll remember back when we were in the heat of it most of our cases that reported meeting with other folks, it wasn't 500 or 250, it was 10, 20 at a house party or a barbecue, that sort of thing. So I think this virus is really teaching us that we have a limited margin of error in trying to circumvent but, not necessarily trying to neglect, but neglecting all those prevention measures that we've got in place. It seems like we really need to keep all those on our minds as we move forward to try to limit the extent to which the virus re-surges, especially in the wake of liberations in activity, if you will, returns to school, if we advance to another phase, those are again times when we're going to be at risk and really need to double down on our efforts around face covering, distancing, and limited our gatherings.

Dave Somers: Just like to add that if you look at the first wave and as we were coming out of it I think a lot of people thought it was over, that we'd gotten past it. So the actions we had taken to that point were primarily stay at home and if you remember the streets were quiet, the roads were quiet. And so that was very effective but there was a lot skepticism about masks and social distancing outside of that. So as we came out of that I think a lot of people were not taking it seriously enough. We've had that experience now what happens. And if you think about it now if you go into public places and particularly retail establishments, masks are now the standard and normalized. Very few people not wearing masks. So I think we've all been educated and been through this a lot and that will help us in the future.

There was an add on to the question. At the end of the first wave, we entered phase 2 and folks seemed to let their guards down, how do you plan on limiting that this fall especially as more folks return to normal? I know we've been working hard at the county to put protections in place at the office but frankly we're going to continue telecommuting and I think a lot businesses that can do that are going to do that. I don't see us returning to normal, the pre-COVID normal any time soon. But again people understand much better now the risk. Any other comments on that doctor?

And there's a follow-up question about when we hope to get to 25 cases per 100,000 and the possibility of applying for phase 3 and any recommendations for schools allowing some sort of in-school learning?

Chris Spitters: Well just to second your comments. I think that the second wave showed us that we really can't let our guard down with this virus and that even when things are looking good as they have been lately we've really got to keep doing all the preventive measures. And that will persist even once vaccination is rolling out. Until we really see a long-term retreat of the virus from significant activity, even with vaccination we're going to all need to continue to use face covering, try to limit our gatherings, keep our distance from folks who aren't member of our household, and wherever possible things like remote work and finding alternative ways to do things to adapt to this new normal, which really will persist for some time still. We're still in the middle of this. So I'd say hang on and keep doing the good work you're doing and, you know, don't anticipate the end of this prematurely.

As far as further driving cases down, certainly that's my hope that it will continue to go down, but you can see from our curve the reality is that it's starting to flatten out and if you extended that line just the way it seems to be going we wouldn't reach 25 cases per 100,000 possibly before we hit the next wave or even if there wasn't a next wave for many, many weeks or months in the future. That line is almost flat for the last week or two. So right now although things are looking better, the Safe Start program has not been reopened to applications to advance and we continue to work with and wait for the Department of Health and the Governor's office to make any announcements in that light. And we're certainly going to continue doing our best to stay well positioned to advance the economy and public life just best and as soon as we can do so safely.

In regards to schools our guidance remains unchanged that now that we as a county have descended below that high transmission range up above 75 cases per 100,000 per two weeks, we're in that 25 to 75 medium risk zone, which in that state framework allows school to start looking at putting elementary school students back in the school either on a hybrid basis or, if space were to permit, full time. And to do so in a layered fashion, to do so slowly. And I think many of the school districts are planning to do so. We had recommended waiting three weeks after Labor Day and the startup of school and so we're in late September early October we'll be transitioning, I think we'll see school transitioning into that as long as everything else remains stable going forward.

Dave Somers: Just to add in terms of the phase 3, we are in discussions with the governor's office and state Department of Health talking about maybe more nuanced, not a full phase 3 but looking at different sectors and what rules can be put in place on a case by case basis, so more of an incremental approach. And I know a few weeks ago we worked with the governor's office to develop rules regarding some recreational activities, pumpkin patches, agritourism, fall event that everybody enjoys, and the rules that had come out from the state would not have allowed those to occur. And working with them we came up with a set of standards, really the industry did, to allow those to go forward in a careful way but still go forward nonetheless. And I think, you know, we'll continue those efforts on a case by case basis to work with the state and our local health officials to really figure out how to proceed carefully.

So follow-up question, any updates of how Labor Day went? It's early, but numbers are still in decline. Also, is the health district tracking cases from the anti-mask pastor who visited Snohomish a week or so ago?

Chris Spitters: Well your question really points to the answer. We're right on the cusp of being able to detect any surge from Labor Day or for that matter from small numbers of children going back to school. Some of the high needs kids who can't learn off site have now returned to school environments in person and both of those were kind of simultaneous during the first week of the month. We haven't seen any significant increase in cases in school-age children or countywide in the total number. As you saw, things are flattening out. It's possible that flattening is a lingering consequence of some gatherings or what have you that occurred over Labor Day. I think only time will tell and I guess the hope is that if we really commit ourselves to these prevention measures going forward and aiming to get that line going back down, whatever that flattening is will be followed by a resumption by a more downward decline.

And regarding the visiting pastor, we were aware of that event, we did try to communicate with the church leadership, didn't succeed in doing that before the event, have done so subsequently and provided all the guidelines and requirements related to faith-based organizations. And we'll certainly be asking cases about, as we always do, about their participation in any large gatherings, including that. I just want to caution you that at the other end of the phone line we're likely to encounter reticence to report those things. We certainly noticed that lately, our case investigators noting individuals becoming a little more reticent to mention gatherings over recent weeks and months.

Dave Somers: And just to tag onto early conversation, our numbers are still declining, if you look at the state as a whole we are stable or declining slightly so the state is doing a great job. Some other states around the country are not in such good shape so I think we all ought to be proud and it's difficult for families and for businesses but we're in a pretty good place and we've just got to kind of hold the line and keep going and hope that some of the vaccines are successful and effective and come sooner rather than later. But we're going to be in an extended period of caution and protection measures that need to be in place as we move forward. But everybody's adjusted really well and we're in a good place as a state because of that and that means fewer people have died from COVID or become ill, so a good thing.

One other pop-up question. Besides folks not telling the whole truth, it seems tracing is going well. How important is that sustained success on contact tracing?

Chris Spitters: Right. Well it's certainly a best practice to do as much as we can with that. It's basically trying to put the brakes on transmission. It's not perfect. We're not going to interrupt every chain of transmission. But if we interrupt enough it can keep that reproductive rate less than one, the average number of new cases that a single case leads to, if we can get that less than one and keep it less than one we're going to keep going down, and that's the goal of case investigations, isolation, contact tracing and quarantining of contacts is to try to limit the number of new cases arising from each case. I think it's had an effect. Like I said, it hasn't completely stopped the pandemic but I think it's contributed to putting the brakes on it and is a great partner on our end to all that you're doing on your end out there to again follow all of those recommendations and do the difficult things that are not convenient and have a cost to them but nonetheless the vast majority of people are doing it and its having an effect.

Joint Information Center: Thank you all. This is Kari in the Joint Information Center. It looks like that wraps us up with the questions. I want to thank you again for joining us this morning and just a quick reminder that we will not be having our regular media availability next Tuesday, but we do plan to resume the week after so please watch for those media advisories. So thank you again and we'll see you all in Zoom-land again soon.