

Don't be a Turkey and What going RED does to one sector

As if the COVID-19 virus had not caused enough harm already, the crunch between steps public health is taking to try to reduce the sharp increase in transmissions occurring presently and the lack of PPP-like benefits right now means that many of our most-economically-vulnerable workers and businesses are about to crack.

The restaurant industry is pushing back saying they are not the source of the problem, and they would largely be correct. Our behaviors are the problem. COVID is the Enemy, not Public Health orders. We have not yet figured out that we each could be COVID Heroes—the masks are there, you just need a cape and some restraint.

Unfortunately, as the holiday week approaches, the Governor's office reports that 1 in 110 Coloradans is infectious. It appears from cell phone tracking data that many of us are not doing our part to save the economy by limiting our activity. If ever there were a time to wearing a mask and changing our plans, the time is now.

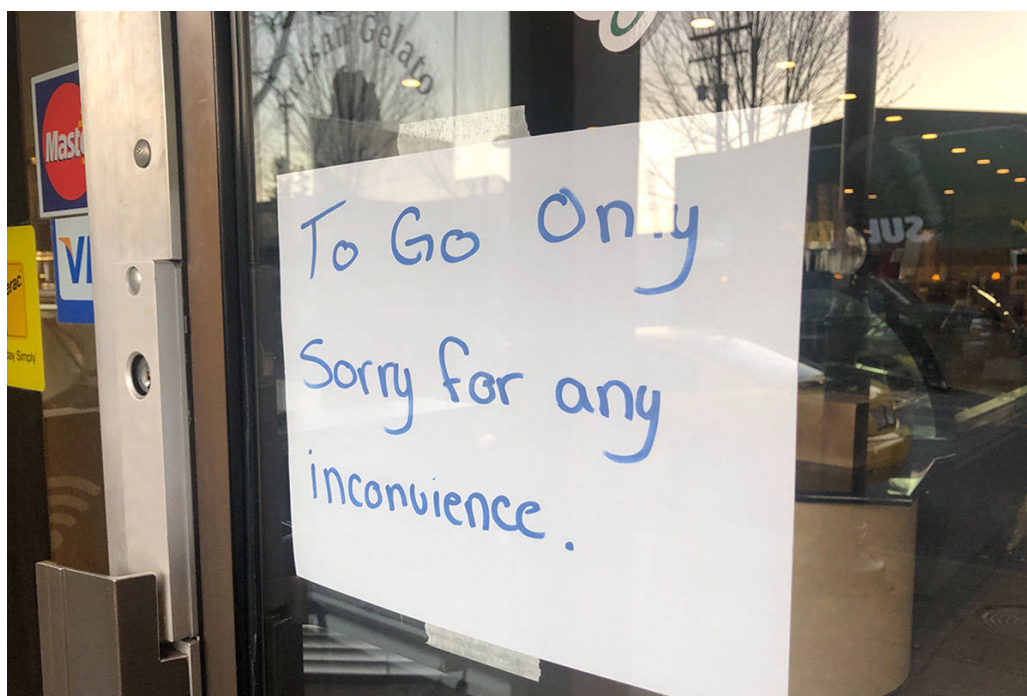
Among high country counties, officials in Summit County are living this impending reality first. As I observe in one Zoom call to another, they are visibly weary. On top of all the other work being done to mitigate impacts of the virus, on Thursday it was noted in Summit that officials there are tracking on social media, a protest being organized by front-line workers scheduled for today in Breckenridge in response to the new health restrictions. This is not one of those "political" stunt rallies at state capitals of late, it is a grass-roots event on a local Facebook page, One Man's Junk.

On Friday, 15 Counties moved to the "Red" COVID level on the state dial including Summit and Routt Counties. Eagle, Pitkin and Grand Counties are each in the Orange "strongly advised to stay at home" level just below that. Birch Barron, Eagle County Emergency Manager in a Community Conversation Friday, November 20th characterized the county as "teetering on the edge between orange and red levels."



What is truly teetering? Business owners and employees who rely on the restaurant sector for their income. The move to Red may just be the “final blow” to many business owners reported [The Colorado Sun](#) Nov 19th with “Hordes of workers are losing their jobs.” It is a must-read article, citing that food service workers make up 10% of the state’s workforce, and that most restaurants are already operating at 1/3 the staff from a year ago. The industry association’s survey the Sun cites claims that 25% of restaurant owners said they would go out of business within a month if faced with a full closure of indoor dining. Those figures are each probably higher in resort communities.

The difference between the two levels is the difference between most Restaurants surviving at 25% indoor capacity in Orange, and many closing their doors and sending employees home because no-indoor dining is allowed in Red “Stay at Home” level. Those businesses that adapted with tents now cannot utilize that adaptation either. They are closed unless they can shift to take-out. Catering by those businesses is not an option either. Red level prohibits indoor seated or unseated events. All that means that many businesses, after a challenging year will close their doors and possibly go out of business before they have a chance to serve customers during the winter ski season. It also means that any workers who were making ends meet with restaurant work will go without critical income, whether it was all their income or their second or third job. **Will they still be here when winter comes?**



One innovative idea was Rio Blanco County’s Work Share Program that was utilized for 60 days back in late March in which underemployed workers could report to the County building and be assigned

essential work. I have asked Rio Blanco Economic Development for how that program worked but have not heard back about whether that was a success or not.

Meanwhile, crickets on the issue from the Senate and the President. The Governor's office has called a special session of the Colorado legislature to work on an aid package. Many counties have been providing direct aid since March. It appears that they may have to re-double those efforts if the high country hopes to save restaurants and their workers.

Heath Harmon, Eagle County Public Health Director in the Community Conversation also challenged individuals who are not hunkered down enough to prevent the spread of the virus. He said, "**When we look at our mobility activity data in Eagle County since August 31 to the end of October, we are at normal levels of activity to non-COVID years.**" There has been a lot of focus lately with the coming holidays about the need to cancel travel plans to protect relatives and friends, and to limit social gatherings to immediate family. That is true. Harmon points out that any event in a house, restaurant, or any time we are in a space for 30 min or 60 minutes without face masks we are putting everybody there at risk." That is why Red level closes indoor dining and indoor events.

If Coloradoans across the high country hunkered down as they did in March for the next three weeks, Harmon noted in the same Community Conversation broadcast that "transmissions could be cut in half" which would allow many of these counties to dial back to Orange or lower, and allow those restaurants to open their doors again, and avoid going out of business.

It has never been a walk-in-the-park being a front-line restaurant or hospitality worker across our mountain resort region. Though some restaurants are very lucrative in "normal" years, it has always been a tough business, especially in our seasonal economies and relatively small towns. They are also essential services in a tourism-based economy and in establishing a sense of place which Ed McMahon, senior resident fellow at ULI who opened the 26th Annual Economic Summit on Nov 20th in Steamboat Springs who said of uniqueness of place, "it is the only competitive advantage economically today."

Food workers are among the many shoulders that keep the wheels of our economy rolling. Chris Romer of the Vail Valley Partnership at the Community Conversation asked for each of us to be "COVID Heroes" by changing our behaviors. It will be interesting if all of these calls out from various voices will be heard by those who have the power to make a difference.

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Next Council Meeting:

December 3, 2020 - 10:00 to 12:00

Full Council, EED Board & Foundation Board Meeting

Zoom Call

Agenda: 2020 Budget Revisions, approve 2021 budget, annual NWCCOG

Foundation meeting