

COUNTY OF WASHINGTON
P.O. Box 297, County Courthouse
Machias, ME 04654
(207) 255-3127
Fax: (207) 255-3313
e-mail: manager@washingtoncountymaine.com

Commissioners:

Christopher M. Gardner, Chairman
John B. Crowley, Sr., Commissioner
Vinton B. Cassidy, Commissioner

County Manager:

Betsy Fitzgerald

Secretary:

Carla Manchester

April 22, 2020

Governor Janet T. Mills
1 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Governor Mills,

First off allow me to send greetings from “way downeast” in Washington County from the entire Board of Commissioners. Knowing you have many friends here in the Sunrise County please know that we can appreciate the fact that you have had to make some monumental decisions over the past several weeks that have not faced any Governor in recent history. Although there will always be a healthy debate over any government decision, the scope of those presented to you are such that no one could ever envy the position you find you or your administration in. It is in that spirit we reach out to you today.

Over the past week there has been much discussion on the process of considering the “re-opening” of state economies across the Country. We are aware of the President’s plan and applaud the stepped approach and the flexibility it recognizes necessary for states to make their own informed decisions. Both Dr. Shah and Dr. Fauci have referenced in respective press conferences that regional approaches are wise and that a “one size fits all” approach is not the best course. Dr. Shah in fact most recently specifically referenced our rural county as one that has unique aspects in this regard.

As such the Washington County Commissioners have been in discussions with our fellow most rural counties of Maine, Aroostook and Piscataquis to see how we may play a role in finding a pathway back to businesses opening up. We recognize that our rural nature and sparse population is potentially a natural fit for any plans you may have on a regional approach. We have been very fortunate, much because of this composition and the effects of the measures deployed, that we have not seen the outbreak to the levels seen in other southern more populated areas. At time of this letter, Washington County has zero active cases, Aroostook has we believe one active case and Piscataquis has only yet its first a few days ago.

Although we recognize that this may not be the extent to what we may see over time, it is an indicator that these three counties enjoy some natural benefits that in the past may have been seen as detriments, again referring to our very rural nature. Washington County more specifically is even more unique in that we are effectively a three sided county. One to Canada, one to the ocean and only one to neighboring counties. We are a county of 31,000 people spread out over 3400 square miles. By comparison the same number of people in New York City are found in approximately 1.1 square miles. Social distancing is almost a way of life for us.

“The Sunrise County – where the sun first shines!”

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As such the three counties had intended to reach out through the Maine County Commissioners Association to request that you take the opportunity to include us in discussions on a pathway forward when you and your team find it possible to start a phased in process for re-opening Maine. A call that I am sure you are hearing more and more but a decision that is no less difficult to make.

Sadly, consensus could not be found at the MCCA as there was such a differing viewpoint from southern to northern, urban to rural and other type defining characteristics. Although some saw this as a reason not to reach out, it is exactly the reason the rural counties had attempted to reach out. We are different as counties and what is good for one may not fit others. Thusly, County Government could be a tremendous resource to help your administration make those decisions on a regional approach.

We feel that, again when your team concurs, rural Maine can help lead Maine back into operation. We certainly may be in a better position to see business open up while still keeping some safeguards in place. Including, but not limited to, protections for congregate living centers, social distancing guidelines, 14 day self-quarantining for out of region visitors, restrictions on numbers in certain businesses such as large retail centers, while at the same time allowing many small businesses ravaged by this closure, especially in rural Maine, the opportunity to open up under these guidelines and be able to make the choice to re-open their own.

We have spoken to our state legislative delegation and they agree that when it is time to move Maine forward, under these type of guidelines Washington County and rural Maine in general can help lead the way. We must in the coming weeks find a balance that allows us to find a way back to business while also keeping Maine as one of the least effected states in the Country. As rural Maine can lead for the state, Maine can lead for the nation. We would respectfully ask that you consider reaching out to us in the coming days to see what role we can play in helping this great state.

Sincerely,



Christopher M. Gardner, Chair

Washington County Commissioners

Cc: Washington County Delegation
Aroostook County Commissioners
Piscataquis County Commissioners
MCCA