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When and how will businesses come back?



Photo Pippa Fisher

Some believe it is possible to operate a small business like this jewelry shop with strict adherence to safety protocols.

By Pippa Fisher

Even as the state begins to ease restrictions in incremental steps, questions remain about how and when Lafayette's small businesses can reopen and how many will survive.

In a May 6 virtual meeting, Lafayette residents heard from city and county leaders who took time to answer residents' questions, assuring the public that for "business as normal" to resume, Lafayette will be getting there with caution and will be following county guidelines which may be more restrictive than those issued by Gov. Gavin Newsom.

Contra Costa County Deputy Health Officer Dr. Rohan Radhakrishna explained the five indicators that health officers in the Bay Area are tracking to assess progress that will determine to what extent and how fast the community can move away from the current shelter-in-place. These include ensuring the total number of COVID-19 cases in the community and in hospitals is flat or decreasing, having sufficient hospital capacity, having sufficient testing completed daily, having sufficient contact tracing capability, and having a sufficient supply of personal protective equipment.

Radhakrishna explained that the numbers of cases is likely to rise with increased testing but in order for businesses to reopen, health officials will be looking at all five of these indicators together for trends. And he explained that gradual small steps are needed to make sure the community does not see a spike in numbers as a result of relaxation.

A May 7 press release from Contra Costa Health Services confirmed the county's cautious approach, saying, "The Bay Area orders do not currently permit curbside pickup from non-essential, non-outdoor businesses, and that is not allowed to begin on Friday, May 8."

But Lamorinda businesses are struggling. No one is more aware of that than Lafayette Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson, who is inundated daily by phone calls.

The chamber has about 600 members. "More than half of our members are businesses of one to two people. It is no secret they are struggling," says Lifson.

In a letter from the chamber to county health officials, Lifson expressed the chamber's gratitude for all the steps taken in managing the crisis. "Understandably, the measures were made with a broad brush and those decisions save thousands of lives," he says. "However," he explains, "we do believe that there are some prudent steps the county could allow that would keep our residents safe and let many of our small businesses get back to work."

Lifson says that the chamber recognizes the basic safety precautions that need to be followed by all businesses and customers, including crowd control, distancing, extra space in aisles, wearing of masks and gloves, but suggests two requests that would safely allow modest business activity to resume.

"If it has been deemed safe to do food pickup curbside, we believe that retail can do curbside pickup safely as well," says Lifson.

Lifson says they would also like the county to consider allowing retail business and the service industry to have one-on-one appointments within the business establishment while allowing time between visits to practice reoccurring sanitation procedures.

Lifson says that they believe that these small steps could allow many of Lafayette's small businesses get back on their feet and begin contributing to the local economy. "There has never been a more important time in our history for the disposable income our residents spend to stay in Lafayette and Contra Costa County."

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