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PRESS RELEASE

County of Sussex

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**Assembly Commerce and Economic Development Committee Acknowledges
Sussex County Freeholder Letter Advocating for Safe Regional Reopening**

(Newton, NJ) The receipt of a letter from Sussex County Freeholder Joshua Hertzberg advocating for a regional reopening for businesses throughout the Garden State was acknowledged during Thursday's Assembly Commerce and Economic Development Committee's Zoom meeting.

Hertzberg's letter to Chairman Assemblyman Gordon Johnson (D-37th Dist.) and the Assembly Committee was one of two mentioned at the meeting, the other from the Northwest New Jersey Freeholder Boards, a joint collaboration of the Sussex, Hunterdon and Warren County Freeholder Boards that are working together for a regional reopening.

"I have been advocating for a regional response from the beginning," Hertzberg said. "It's completely insane that we are just now starting to have that discussion in Trenton. Our District 24 Legislators, along with our entire Freeholder Board, continued to advocate for this throughout the pandemic; and finally, our voices are being heard. I guess we'll see if they are listening."

Hertzberg's letter to the Assembly Committee sympathized with industries that have yet to fully reopen, mentioning the plight of restaurant owners that readied for inside dining in early July, only to have Governor Phil Murphy take that option off the table just three days prior to the planned restart.

During the meeting Michele Sierkerka, President and CEO the New Jersey Business & Industry Association, said Sussex County is one of a few counties with COVID-19 cases less than two percent of the entire statewide count. Sierkerka advocated for a regional approach for counties like Sussex with low numbers yet an unemployment rate at more than 12 percent, which is higher than the national average.

Christina Renna the President and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey told the Committee she had suggested a regional reopening approach, only to be told by the Murphy Administration it violated the 14th Amendment's provisions of equal protection under the law. In Hertzberg's letter, he referred to the Unconstitutionality of the Murphy Administration delay in regional reopening. He questioned the Governor's science and data, why New Jersey Transit buses could operate to capacity, but restaurants and gyms could not fully reopen.

"I was all for flattening the curve, relieving our health care systems and its heroes who were putting in 16-hour days regularly, but what started as a reasonable response has turned into political theater," he wrote to the Committee. "We all wanted to help protect our families, friends and neighbors; and what began as instituted emergency measures, has turned into a government where our elected representatives have no voice. It has become a place where our Constitution, be it federal or state, has no bearing; and our freedoms are dictated to us."

Sussex County Freeholder Herbert Yardley, said he has been disappointed from the lack of response of the Murphy Administration on this issue, with the Northwest New Jersey Freeholder Boards having sent a plan to the Governor for regional reopening, which has yet to be acknowledged.

“We have a plan and need to be able to evaluate it to move forward,” Yardley said.

During the meeting, other business leaders and epidemiologists spoke in favor of regional reopening. David Holtgrave, PhD, the Dean of Public Health, University at Albany, State University of New York, said in New York the regional approach “seemed to help balance economic and educational needs to reopen with considerations of the relative safety or danger of the local epidemiology and to allow monitoring.” Meeting participant Thomas Bracken, the President & CEO of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce called it “very unfounded” that health clubs and similar businesses contributed to the escalation of the COVID-19 curve.

Marilou Halvorsen the CEO and President of the New Jersey Restaurant and Hospitality Association stated the restaurant industry ranked ninth as a COVID-19 transmission source, of all industries, because of its stringent sanitation practices. She noted that New Jersey is one of only three states nationwide, the other two New Mexico and California, where indoor dining is still not permitted. She also said New Jerseyans will dine in competing neighboring states, such as Delaware, Pennsylvania and New York, to experience indoor dining.

“If you’re in Lambertville, you’re walking across the bridge to New Hope,” she said.

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