

March 30, 2020



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The Honorable Jay Inslee, Governor  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 40002  
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Re: COVID-19 and Home Construction

Dear Governor Inslee:

On behalf of the nearly 600 member companies of the Central Washington Home Builders Association (CWHBA) most of which are small businesses, thank you for your leadership and the work of your staff during this difficult and challenging time. We greatly appreciate the many difficult and rapid decisions you are having to make to keep us safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are writing to ask you to reconsider your policy direction stating that “construction is not considered an essential activity” and therefore not authorized under your Stay Home, Stay Healthy Proclamation (20-25). CWHBA shares your strong commitment to protecting the health and well-being of all Washingtonians amid the pandemic. We know that home builders can work safely to minimize the spread of the virus. In fact, your current policy permits low-income housing construction to continue demonstrating that it can be done safely. Our members are taking this crisis very seriously and understand the need to make proper distancing and safety measures their highest priority. Furthermore, CWHBA welcomes oversight to ensure we get it right. California and other regions of the country are showing it can be done.

Also, consider the recent Department of Homeland Security “Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce: Ensuring Community and National Resilience in COVID-19 Response Version 2.0”.

This recent update to the guidelines includes “Workers performing housing construction related activities to ensure additional units can be made available to combat the nation’s existing housing supply shortage”. Adhering to this guideline will lessen the economic harm that is already felt as a result of the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” directive which is causing distress to a multitude of employers, suppliers, and employees. The fiscal impact to our local communities is presenting challenges that will require a great deal of energy and resources to overcome.

If your directive is extended past April 8th, the ability and speed to recover economically will be evermore challenging and will significantly impact the livelihoods of the residents of the State of Washington.

There are six key reasons why we consider home construction to be an essential activity and should be allowed to resume, and we urge your consideration of these points as you weigh this critical issue:

- 1) **Home construction can be done safely.** Workers constructing homes generally are or can be separated in the work that they do, and with additional, proper measures in place, it is entirely

feasible for home construction activity to meet social distancing, worker protection, and appropriate health screenings in order to proceed safely. Construction sites can be operated consistent with all the protocols necessary to minimize the risks of virus transmission. There are several valuable job site materials and safety guidance available which are readily feasible to implement and which many home builders have already been actively implementing for their projects. Additionally, we would be open to temporary, enforced, rules from the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries to work a site during this crisis. Also, we would support testing all workers before returning to work and that they be tested at regular intervals set by the state.

- 2) **Local permitting and inspections can be done safely.** As part of the Essential Infrastructure, residential construction requires that government building and zoning departments continue to operate. Furthermore, for the safety and wellbeing of current and future occupants, governments must allow inspections to occur in a timely manner. In recent weeks, we've seen local governments modify the permitting and inspection process to minimize contact with others and safeguard health in the wake of the COVID crisis. For example, some jurisdictions have implemented video inspections, distancing measures, online permitting, and more. We believe these important services can and should be allowed to continue in support of housing construction when proper safety protocols are followed.
- 3) **Housing is a major engine of our state economy.** We are very concerned that a comprehensive shut-down of home construction could be devastating to our local, regional, and state economies. The business of building new homes directly and indirectly generates taxes and fees, creating a revenue source for state and local governments. Building housing of all types generates significant tax revenue to invest in the communities of current residents. For example, a report from the National Association of Home Builders shows the total economic impact of the construction of 24,000 single-family homes built in Washington State in 2018 was \$8.4 billion. Our economy is already experiencing negative effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. If home construction can be done safely, then we should enable it to continue. Doing so will help put our state and local economy in a stronger position when we come out of this slowdown.
- 4) **Halting construction of homes will only exacerbate our current housing crisis.** At a time when our state faces a massive housing shortage, rising housing costs, and a homelessness crisis, we cannot afford to hit pause on new home construction. A delay of a few weeks will have a far greater impact on housing than one might think, especially considering that things like labor, supply chains, and permitting will be very slow to restart. To fully mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on our housing crisis, it is critical that ALL housing construction be able to proceed, not only publicly financed, low-income housing. New homes now under construction are part of a ladder of housing in our state. These homes play an important role not only for new home buyers, but these families will also vacate another home that someone else in need of housing can then buy or rent. We must build more housing of all types to meet the housing needs of our state and keep our communities affordable for all Washingtonians.

- 5) **Washingtonians are relying on us for homes.** Builders often have buyers attached to many of the homes they are building, so it's not just vendors and suppliers that are affected by a shut-down. Buyers, who include current and future residents of our communities, have money in escrow, loan locks, and other financial commitments contingent on scheduled delivery of homes. These buyers are now having to rearrange plans to move, and may need to extend apartment leases, or delay closing on an existing home. There are some who could lose a mortgage rate lock if the delivery of their home is delayed, creating great distress on these families who understandably just want to move into their new homes.
  
- 6) **Language in Proclamation 20-05, Section 4(d) allowing "minimum basic operations," though well-intended, creates an added, undue burden for active construction sites.** Halting construction creates a myriad of safety issues for active homebuilding sites. For example, these projects often have a variety of valuable materials either stockpiled for use, such as lumber and other building materials, or being installed, like copper wire and appliances, as well as equipment used during construction. These sites are at significant risk for trespassing, looting, arson, vandalism, and other criminal activity. All of this to the massive financial detriment of the builder. It also creates additional, costly demands on policing and security needed to protect homes under construction. There are life-safety issues to weigh, too, when you consider the range of potential hazards on a construction site where work has been halted, such as holes in the ground, or framing that could topple over during a windstorm.

We are very concerned that disrupting construction is going to create a domino effect leading to dire negative economic repercussions for an already-burdened economy, and it will hurt families in need of housing.

**We respectfully ask you to reverse your policy direction so that home construction is considered an essential activity and therefore authorized to continue operating under your Stay Home, Stay Healthy Proclamation, so long as proper distancing and sanitation protocols are followed.**

Thank you for your consideration of this request in support of the housing sector and Washingtonians seeking homes. CWHBA's members stand with you during these uncertain times and we greatly appreciate your leadership and the work of your staff and those who are spending every waking hour keeping us safe.

Sincerely,



Chelsea Snodgrass  
Executive Officer