



March 25, 2020

The Honorable Sarah Eckhardt
County Judge, Travis County
PO Box 1748
Austin, TX 78767

And

The Honorable Steve Adler
Mayor, City of Austin
P.O. Box 1088
Austin, TX 78767

Dear Judge Eckhardt and Mayor Adler,

Thank you for your efforts and the hard work of your staff and officials to keep our community safe during this public health crisis.

The design, development, real estate, and building communities in Austin have joined together to share with you real-life concerns and consequences that have already unfolded regarding the Stay at Home – Work Safe Orders released yesterday for the City of Austin and Travis County. As an industry, we were surprised and disappointed that Austin intentionally chose to prohibit commercial and residential construction through April 13, with very limited exceptions. Cities across Texas, notably Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, and their respective counties have all recognized commercial and residential construction as essential services at this time. This is especially concerning in light of the acknowledged shortage of housing in Austin.

Unfortunately, the Orders and subsequent Guidance for Construction document raise more questions than answers as to which construction projects are to be deemed essential and by which official. We cannot express strongly enough how much confusion these documents have injected into the local building industry in a brief 24-hour period. We understand, for example, that AISD and ACC projects are now deemed essential and will continue. However, what about a grocery store, gas station, bank, health care facility, and hundreds of other examples of projects underway that contribute to the ability of our community to carry out essential services?

The lack of clarity in the City and County Orders has thrown our building industry into complete confusion.

Furthermore, if left unchanged, the Orders and subsequent Guidance for Construction document could have the unintended consequence of leaving individuals and families without access to safe housing during this critical time. Many residents across Central Texas are under leaseback contracts that are scheduled to end during this period and if construction on their new home is stopped could leave these families without a home if they are unable to secure an extension to their leaseback.

We understand that the entire economy is taking a hit right now. However, the long-lasting fallout from completely stopping all projects in the middle of construction will be hard, if not impossible, to bounce back from. We are fully committed to taking every safety precaution to protect both our workers and our community and feel confident we can do this while continuing to work.

It is important to understand that construction job sites are not densely populated work areas. Construction sites are a unique workplace with their own levels of social distancing built in. Many workers are isolated completely or separated by large distances. In addition, access to the job sites is strictly controlled which enables potential points for screening and increased safety. Additionally, safety briefings are already part of the construction industry culture, and with the additional guidelines developed by OSHA to address COVID-19, briefings include the extra precautions recommended by the CDC and OSHA.

We urge you to immediately amend your respective Stay at Home – Work Safe Orders and explicitly allow both commercial and residential construction to continue. Again, this is the very reasonable approach adopted by Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas to balance public health with the economic reality.

We invite you to visit a local job site to see the added health and safety protocols put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

We urge you to Keep Austin Building.

Sincerely,



Emily Blair
Executive Vice President
Austin Apartment Association



Tracey Littlefield
President
Associated Builders and Contractors
Central Texas Chapter



Emily Chenevert
CEO
Austin Board of Realtors



Silvia Pendleton
Executive Director
Austin Contractors and
Engineers Association



Phil Thoden
President & CEO
Associated General Contractors
Austin Chapter



Ingrid Spencer
Executive Director
AIA Austin



Dewitt Peart
President & CEO
Downtown Austin Alliance



Michael W. Rollins, CCE
President & CEO
Austin Chamber of Commerce



Carrie Ciliberto
CEO
Home Builders Association of
Greater Austin



Tina Cannon
Executive Director
LGBT Chamber of Commerce



Dianne Bangle
CEO
Real Estate Council of Austin