

State Representative
LOUIS SCHMITT, JR., MEMBER
79th legislative district

Harrisburg Office:
Room 415 Irvis Office Building
P.O. Box 202079
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2079

District Office:
Gables Office Building
1331 12th Avenue, Suite 104
Altonna, PA 16601
Phone: (814) 946-7218



House of Representatives
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Harrisburg

COMMITTEES:
Transportation
Subcommittee Chairman on Railroads

Commerce
Local Government
State Government
Urban Affairs

www.RepLouSchmitt.com
lschmitt@pahousegop.com

Monday, May 4, 2020

Governor Wolf:

In my position as State Representative for the 79th Legislative District in Blair County I have focused on thinking through and solving problems -- not causing them. And I know that you have on a number of prior occasions expressed your desire to approach problems in that same thoughtful way. I am therefore writing this letter on behalf of the good citizens of Blair County to request your attention and mindful consideration regarding a matter of the utmost importance to them.

Governor, throughout the months of March and April the citizens of Blair County have acted responsibly and diligently in obeying your stay at home order. They complied with your mandates, even though doing so required them to pay a high price, both personally and economically. They closed their businesses. They were laid off from their jobs. They were isolated from their loved ones. They brought their lives to a standstill. They suffered sleepless nights filled with great concerns and great worries about the present and the future. But still and all they did what you asked them to do. They sacrificed and they fought the virus the way you told them to. And they were successful.

Blair County has never had more than 24 cases of COVID-19 at any one time in a population of over 122,000 people.

On May 1st, you announced the initial step in your plan to ease restrictions in Pennsylvania. The citizens of Blair County had been hanging on as best they could and looking forward to your announcement with great anticipation. As it turns out, 24 counties will now move from Red status to Yellow status as of May 8th. The citizens of those counties will soon commence the process of reopening their businesses, returning to their jobs, and enjoying that increased sense of hope which comes only with the realization that some form of normalcy will begin to be restored.

As of today, the citizens of Blair County will unfortunately not be among them.

As best I can tell, the decision to set those 24 counties on the road from Red status to Yellow status was based in large part on low per-capita virus case counts, the ability to conduct contact tracing and testing, and appropriate population density to contain community spread. Consideration was also given to the number of ICU and regular hospital beds, the population of people over 60, and reopening contact risks, such as the numbers of workers employed in a currently closed industry sector. A formula developed at Carnegie Mellon University apparently provided some analytical assistance. Initially it seemed as if the reopening process would be based on regions, but Secretary Levine later stated that your administration was not necessarily wedded to a regional as opposed to a county-by-county reopening approach, and that individual counties would be considered. That is exactly what I am asking you to do.

Governor, you should know that Blair County has a per capita virus case count that is lower – and in some cases drastically lower – than the vast majority of the 24 counties moving to Yellow status as of May 8th. Just to take one example, Blair County shares a border with Centre County. Many citizens from Blair County work in Centre County and vice versa. Throughout this entire crisis Centre County's per capita virus case count has been and continues to be significantly higher than Blair County's per capita virus case count. And yet Centre County is moving to Yellow status. Blair County is not.

In terms of appropriate population density to contain community spread, I recognize that the city of Altoona, with a population of approximately 44,000 people, is situated within Blair County. However, the county of Erie also takes in the city of Erie, with its population of over 96,000. I fail to see how Erie County, with a city more than double the population of the largest city in Blair County, has a more appropriate population density to contain community spread. And yet Erie County is moving to Yellow status. Blair County is not.

As for the ability to conduct contact tracing and testing, Blair County is home to three hospitals: UPMC Altoona, Nason Hospital in Roaring Spring, and Tyrone Hospital. The county of Blair possesses all of the resources necessary to conduct any contact tracing and testing that will be required, and to do so on a scale which meets or exceeds the resources available to the vast majority of the 24 counties moving from Red status to Yellow status ahead of it. Because Blair County is home to a major UPMC medical facility and two other community hospitals, it possesses a quantity of ICU and regular hospital beds -- along with a supply of ventilators -- that is the envy of the overwhelming majority of the 24 counties identified on May 1st.

Blair County, like much of Pennsylvania, has a significant population of people over 60 years of age. But so does every single one of those 24 counties moving ahead of it.

When it comes to reopening contact risks such as the number of workers employed in a currently closed industry sector, I am not aware that Blair County is distinguishable in any significant manner from the 24

counties where restrictions are to be eased. If you are aware of anything that distinguishes the county of Blair in that regard, I ask you to please let me know.

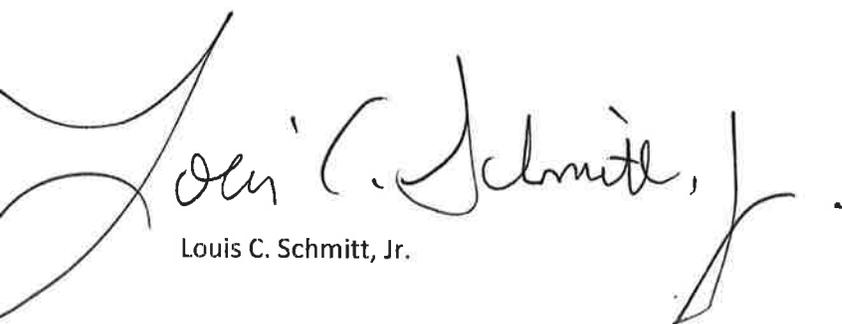
Governor, with all due respect, I cannot comprehend any objective basis upon which Blair County should have been excluded from moving to Yellow status as of May 8th.

If you take issue with my foregoing analysis in any manner, if there were additional factors not mentioned above that led to Blair County being held back, if am somehow missing something, I ask only that you provide me the details of where I went wrong or what I have failed to take into account. In a similar vein, if the CMU formula was significant to Blair County staying Red, I ask you to provide me the specifics of its role in the decision-making process. If there is something more we need to do here in Blair County, if there is some reopening benchmark or metric that we are falling short of, we need to know – and we need to know now. We here in Blair County are desperate to move forward, and yet we cannot hope to meet the requirements for moving from Red to Yellow status unless and until we understand precisely what those requirements are.

Otherwise, let me say that I have tried my best to set forth herein the reasons why Blair County's situation should receive your attention and thoughtful consideration. If upon further reflection you are convinced of the merits raised by this correspondence, I ask you to revisit the case of Blair County and to move it forthwith to Yellow status, by May 8th if at all possible.

Governor, in the final analysis this is a problem that only you have the power to solve. On behalf of the 122,000 citizens here in central Pennsylvania who have sacrificed so much and who have been so patient -- and who have done everything you asked of them -- I petition you to allow Blair County to begin its recovery. This is an opportunity for you to act in accordance with your goal of bringing Pennsylvania back, and bringing it back safely and responsibly. Blair County stands ready, willing, and able to help you accomplish that goal. But we need your help first.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Louis C. Schmitt, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Louis C. Schmitt, Jr.