



June 1, 2020

The Honorable Scott Wiggam
Ohio House of Representatives, District 1
77 South High Street, 13th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

RE: HB 671 Continuation of Commerce Act

Chairman Wiggam, Ranking Member Kelly and members of the State and Local Government Committee,

As the Gallia County Economic Development Director, I would like to express support for the pending legislation, the Continuation of Commerce Act (HB 671).

Gallia County is a rural county in Southeast Ohio with a population of just under 31,000. During my 10-year tenure as Economic Development Director, our businesses have not faced the challenges and uncertainty as we have seen from this pandemic. Fortunately, Gallia County has been spared from a large spread of COVID-19, and to date, we have had just 6 positive and 2 probable cases.

On March 22, Health Director Amy Acton issued a two week Stay at Home Order, resulting in the drastic reductions of business operations, as well as closing businesses and livelihoods of those deemed 'Non-Essential'. On April 2nd, that order was again extended until May 2nd. Since that time, businesses have been granted allowances to reopen, under strict guidelines, and many businesses primarily in the travel and entertainment industry are still closed with no opening information on the horizon.

As you know, small businesses have unfairly endured the brunt of these closure orders. Large box businesses have been allowed to continue to operate throughout the pandemic and online sales of these companies, including Amazon, have soared. In Gallia County, over 96% of businesses employ less than 50 employees, and 63% of businesses employ less than 4.

Many of our companies, including small retailers, personal services, and those in the travel and entertainment industry were forced to sit idly aside, waiting and worrying, what will happen to the future of their business, employees, and livelihoods. The mandatory and extended closures have been detrimental to businesses.

In communities all across Ohio, our small businesses are our friends and neighbors. We attend church together, our kids play sports and participate in 4-H together, and our small businesses are the strongest supporters of our youth activities. Contrary to orders released by the Department of Health, no business in our community is 'non-essential'. These business owners and their employees are not only essential, but they ARE OUR COMMUNITY.

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With what our businesses have experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that measures are put in place to provide business owners with the opportunity to protect their livelihoods from extended orders from the board of health.

HB 671 provides legislative oversight to the board of health orders for the purpose of restriction of prevention of disease for no more than 14 days unless extended by the approval from the General Assembly's Joint Committee on Agency Rule Review (JCARR).

Additionally, businesses closed as a result of an order of the board health may appeal the order in a court of common pleas, requiring timely review within 48 hours of the filing. Lastly, HB 671 projects businesses by prohibiting state or local licensing authority from disciplining the licensee for engaging their licensed occupation and operating during a pandemic event. HB 671 will seek to provide business owners with the tools and an opportunity to maintain the operation of their business without fear of jail, heavy fines, and loss of licensure.

I trust my local businesses to operate in a safe manner and keep the best interest of their customers and employees in mind. The financial and emotion strain placed on businesses, employees, and the community by extended health orders are far-reaching and difficult to quantify.

Businesses are the lifeblood of our local economies. As the Economic Development Director, it is my responsibility to advocate for the tools and support necessary for our businesses to flourish. Therefore, I strongly urge you to support HB 671, The Continuation of Continued Commerce Act.

Sincerely,

Melissa Clark
Director
Gallia County Economic Development

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