

HOT TOPIC #22: May 6, 2020

Finding the Balance: Community Health and the Local Economy

COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders

Tightrope walking is the terrifying skill of being able to cross a rope strung between two high points. The phrase also refers to people that are faced with a difficult situation, especially when it requires a choice between two different options or points of view. Always there are pros and cons to each.

On a real tight rope, or in the context of the use of the phrase, balance is the key to not falling.

In the midst of this global health pandemic, we find ourselves very high up and very far out on a tight rope.

Since the beginning, an urgent set of decisions were made to ensure the safety of our families, friends and neighbors throughout the islands and beyond. These actions had to be measured and carefully considered, but also had to be aggressive. So far, we can all be proud of the response, but we are only at the end of the first stage of this crisis. There are many challenges ahead.

Today, as we are looking to carefully inch our way to the other side of the tightrope and towards a careful recovery, we need to keep our focus on the economic impacts while also having our eyes glued to community health and safety.

It is not an all or none decision, or process. It is not easy or simple. It does not boil down to one clear answer.

The financial impact to San Juan County's workers and families has been enormous. Between March 1st and April 25th, more than 2,100 islanders filed initial claims for unemployment. People from all walks of life and work are included in that number. Housekeepers, administrative assistants, wait staff, electricians, healthcare technicians, architecture and engineering staff, dental staff, cooks, haircare specialists, teachers –to name only some of those impacted. At the same time, businesses owners are fearing for their survival, they are struggling to navigate a web of possible support, and the uncertain timing of reopening makes decision making hard.

Victoria Compton, Executive Director of the San Juan County Economic Development Council highlights what her organization is seeing, "Nearly all sectors of our economy have been impacted, and there are significant ramifications to come. Islanders' support for our small businesses has been incredibly heartwarming and we're all looking forward to a fully opened economy, but it is vital that we choose a safe and responsive way to begin to reopen our industries."

On the health side, we've seen in other states what happens when this disease gets going and how sweeping the impacts can be. Western Washington dodged a bullet, but to be clear, it was a near miss. We want to be cheering on the Seahawks at CenturyLink Stadium this fall, not building a hospital there. Continuing to flatten the curve and control the spread is critical.

County Health Officer Frank James understands the challenge but also has faith in the islands, "I don't want to understate the obstacles that are ahead from a public health perspective. It is highly likely that there will be other waves of illness, and they may be worse than the first. We're working hard to prepare. Our goal is to get the islands ready so that we can begin to methodically restore some businesses and activities. Our goal is to utilize the strengths of our community and their willingness to

do the right thing so that we can truly set the bar high for how this can be done in a balanced and thoughtful way.”

Throughout, our island communities have agreed that we are in this together. We will strive to find ways to return our islands’ workers back to their jobs. And we will all make ongoing sacrifices and adjustments to our lives to keep ourselves and our neighbors safe. As we move through this crisis, we must continue to keep the goals of both health and economy front and center. We will do this using science and data. We will do this in a way that is fair and equitable for all islanders. We will listen carefully to leaders and experts, but in the end, it will be on us to get right.

We will keep our balance and we will not fall off this tight rope.