

Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League

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March 13, 2020

The Honorable Ralph Northam
P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, VA 23218
Email via online form: <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/constituent-services/communicating-with-the-governors-office/>

Dear Governor Northam:

Request to suspend all upcoming public hearings for the foreseeable future and to extend public commenting periods until it's deemed safe to hold public hearings

I am submitting this request on behalf of the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League (BREDL) based in Glendale Springs, North Carolina. BREDL is a regional, community-based, non-profit environmental organization founded in March 1984. Our founding principles are earth stewardship, environmental democracy, social justice, and community empowerment. BREDL has chapters and members throughout the Southeast including in Virginia.

We appreciate the steps you have taken thus far to protect Virginians. However, based on the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak and the critical need to control it, **we are requesting that you suspend all upcoming public hearings for the foreseeable future.**

We further request that you extend public commenting periods – or suspend them – until it is deemed safe to hold public hearings. This in no way should be taken as an opportunity to green light projects and approve them without public hearings. The right for the public to voice legitimate concerns on projects and plans should not be discarded, but the public shouldn't have to face health risks to voice those concerns.

As you know, the World Health Organization has just declared the global COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic¹.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom has stated:

¹ <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-mission-briefing-on-covid-19---12-march-2020>

We have made this assessment for two main reasons: first, because of the speed and scale of transmission.

The second reason is that despite our frequent warnings, we are deeply concerned that some countries are not approaching this threat with the level of political commitment needed to control it.

Let me be clear: describing this as a pandemic does not mean that countries should give up. The idea that countries should shift from containment to mitigation is wrong and dangerous.

On the contrary, we have to double down. This is a controllable pandemic. Countries that decide to give up on fundamental public health measures may end up with a larger problem, and a heavier burden on the health system that requires more severe measures to control.

All countries must strike a fine balance between protecting health, preventing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended that all people (rather low-risk or high-risk) should be practicing “social distancing”. The CDC defines social distancing as “remaining out of congregate settings, avoiding mass gatherings, and maintaining distance (approximately 6 feet or 2 meters) from others when possible.”²

The CDC has stressed that people at risk for serious illness from COVID-19 should³:

- Take everyday precautions to keep space between yourself and others.
- When you go out in public, keep away from others who are sick, limit close contact and wash your hands often.
- Avoid crowds as much as possible.
- Avoid cruise travel and non-essential air travel.
- During a COVID-19 outbreak in your community, stay home as much as possible to further reduce your risk of being exposed.

Data collected thus far by health experts indicate that COVID-19 has severe implications to:

- Older adults
- People who have serious chronic medical conditions (underlying conditions) like:
 - Heart disease

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/risk-assessment.html>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/high-risk-complications.html>

- Diabetes
- Lung disease

In 2016, older adults (age 60 and above) made up over 21% of the U.S. population. Tom Frieden, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was quoted in an LA Times article saying that in the United States, “about 60% of adults have an underlying condition that could affect the severity of the coronavirus.⁴”

The CDC further states that if a COVID-19 outbreak happens in your community, it could last for a long time.

Given the facts that we know about the COVID-19 outbreak, we strongly urge you to consider our requests.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Louis A. Zeller". The signature is written in a cursive style and is followed by a horizontal line.

Louis A. Zeller
Executive Director
Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League

⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-03/coronavirus-spreads-the-elderly-and-unhealthy-are-at-highest-risk>