



Testimony of Chris Barrett for the Senate Majority Policy Committee  
RE: Economic Impact of COVID Closures on the Tourism and Hospitality Industries  
4/13/2021

Good morning Mr. Chairman, ranking member, and members of this committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to make a brief statement this morning. Your interest in our industry is greatly appreciated and respected.

If I may, I would like to provide some summary comments concerning the Pocono Mountains and its hundreds of diverse leisure and hospitality properties. The days and months have been long and hard, but the thousands of men and women who have devoted their lives to working within our industry have persevered. The Pocono Mountains Visitors Bureau represents the four counties of the Poconos (Carbon, Monroe, Wayne, and Pike) and spans a region larger than the size of Delaware and welcomes visitors by the tens of millions annually (28.9M in 2019 – a record). The spending from these visitors drives the economy to the tune of more than \$4.2 billion dollars in direct and indirect spending annually. Our industry employs over 35,000 individuals and generates over \$282 million in State and Local tax revenues yearly. We are certainly the #1 industry in the Poconos which contributes over 64% of the regions total labor income.

In the interest of time, as well as the fact that many fine operators are testifying today, I would like to leave the committee with some points to reflect upon. These will be presented under one-word headings.

**Uncertainty:** The wholesale closures of hospitality businesses has left the industry in a severe labor vacuum. Thousands of individuals have left the industry, most likely for good, after the trauma of the last 12 months. They could not depend upon their employers for their or their families' livelihoods. This was by no means the fault of the employers. They did everything that they could to support their team members as they considered them as their own family.

Also, the industry had no advanced warning as to when mitigation measures would be put in place...or when would they be removed. Or when would they be reimposed. Why is that relevant? Employers scheduled team members as well as ordered tens of thousands of dollars in perishable food items in anticipation of reopening dates or ongoing operations, only to be closed abruptly with little notice. Again, this caused uncertainty.

**Desperation:** During March of 2020, we watched tens of thousands of individuals in the Pocono hospitality industry lose their jobs literally overnight without the faintest idea of what they would do. They could not "telework" and were told that they were "non-essential." Non-essential after providing years of fateful service to an industry that they loved and were passionate about. Thousands attempted to file for Unemployment Insurance and were unable to which caused

immense anxiety. Answers to that dilemma were not forthcoming. Again, they were deemed non-essential.

One ray of hope were the actions of the owners of our businesses. Shuttered by the State, they were undeterred and decided that they would show leadership and support their team members and their families directly. Kalahari, Settlers Hospitality, Woodloch, Camelback, Great Wolf and many others continued to pay their employees, provided health benefits, and in most cases weekly “care packages” at their own cost. These costs ran into the millions of dollars at a time when their operations were closed and providing zero cash flow. Some of our owners wondered how they would feed and provide for their own families. In short, they reached into their own pockets to ensure the well being of their team members. They understand that the true essence of hospitality is its people.

**Communication:** This pandemic was fraught with uncertainty at the outset. We, as an industry, bore the brunt of the closures. When queried, the answer always was....” The virus is in charge.” This was incredibly frustrating as we sought the answers as to why our industry was the one most effected. We pleaded for an answer that would make sense. We did ask for the science on numerous occasions and never received a response. Putting that point aside for a moment a larger concern should be voiced.

Communication from the administration was uncoordinated and haphazard. In the Poconos, we took on the role of a public information officer and devised a COVID 19 website for the hospitality industry and our residents to use to access up to date information concerning the virus. The PMVB also devoted it’s full advertising resources towards launching PSA campaigns to encourage residents to “Flatten the Curve and “Wallop the Wave.” In addition, we also offered the **Pocono Promise**. The program was made available to any entity within the Pocono Mountains committed to operating safely and in the best interest of their employees and our millions of guests. Signers of the **Pocono Promise** pledged to follow proper CDC guidelines for reopening and operating and to support one another as the region worked together to make an impact that all could aspire to. To date, close to 400 local businesses have signed on to this commitment.

I cannot underscore enough how the lack of communication in the form of clear guidelines surrounding the administration’s mitigation plans was an incredible source of stress and anxiety for thousands of individuals in the Pocono Mountains. In addition, the burden carried by the owners of our properties was tragic to watch. To a person they persevered and rose above it and innovated despite the oppressive environment. It is an object study in resiliency under pressure handled with immense grace.

**Collaboration:** This is the most tragic point. An individual restaurant owner in the Poconos was interviewed in October of 2020 by WNEP and asked about his impression of the uneven mitigation orders. His response was classic. He noted, “We understand the need to stop this virus, but don’t ignore us. We are people, talk with us.” The response was simple and profound. The administration completely ignored our industry. In this, an incredible opportunity was lost.

The PMVB did write numerous letters to Governor Wolf offering the help of our industry. Our theory was to come along side with government to battle the virus together. As we know, the Governor acted unilaterally. It was not for lack of trying, many associations, such as PRLA were roundly ignored.

It was extremely disappointing for all of us in the Poconos (and I am confident that it was not only our region) to be ignored and dismissed. State government should have set the leadership example and have been a convener to help mitigate fear of the unknown. Instead, we were left to our own devices. Despite this we did rise to the occasion.

As you can imagine, the hard-working individuals in Carbon, Monroe, Wayne, and Pike counties are eagerly awaiting the further widespread distribution of the vaccines so that we can all get back to the business of living our normal lives. Our hope is that the response of the administration to this pandemic is studied and a report rendered so that lessons learned can be applied in the future. The true fallout from this pandemic I fear is still left to be felt.

Our region looks to help businesses get back on their feet, to help families find a way to improve their overall mental and physical health, as well as to continue to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, so that we can tell future generations we confronted this together and succeeded together.

I thank you for this opportunity to testify today and would be happy to answer your questions.