

City of Gulfport – Memo Regarding Crowd Management at Grocery Stores

Thank you for taking time out of your hectic schedules to meet with Gulfport officials for the purpose of discussing ideas as to best practices for crowd control - with the goal of minimizing the spread of COVID-19 amongst your employees and customers. As indicated, at the start of our meeting, the overriding concern is the health, safety, and welfare of our citizens. Until we get a handle on curbing the spread of this dangerous virus, opportunities for panic still persist, and the hit to our economy will continue to worsen.

The last thing we want to do as a governmental entity is dictate policy and practices to the business community. In most cases, best thing we can do, is get out of the way. Where we have a moral responsibility to step in, is when there is a threat – natural or man-made – to our society. We are facing such a threat, today. Many are still in denial about the very serious challenge the Coronavirus presents to our health care system, but the concerns are very real.

Our world is anything, but “business as usual.” We can’t do things like we used to, when it comes to conducting business – particularly where public interaction is concerned. Last week, cities across the Coast adopted new orders in concert with the State Department of Health, and in keeping with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control. As a result, places where the public has routinely gathered – bars, restaurants, salons, exercise facilities, etc. – have either ceased operations or significantly restricted access to facilities – observing sanitation, social distancing, and not allowing more than 10 patrons at a time into their places of business.

The one market we are not seeing a universal application of these practices are grocery stores. Your facilities are crucial to our community’s physical and mental well-being, but at present are contributing to the continued spread of COVID-19, given the crowds we are observing daily. As such, you are being asked to ramp up or modify existing practices to ensure you are minimizing chances for the spread of the virus through managing the number of people allowed into the stores at any one time, and requiring strict observance of the 6’ social distancing requirement – in lines, aisles, and checkout counters.

While we don’t have all the answers, and you know your business best, the request for area managers to collectively suggest ideas as to how best to plan for crowds is appreciated and needed. This is a serious consideration, and will work best if our area store managers come up with a group solution. If done properly, it can help educate the public and prevent panic shopping if and when the need arises to enact further restrictions on public contact.

Based upon calls and comments received after yesterday’s meeting, it is my impression that there is a reluctance to collaborate amongst competing interests. We are in unprecedented times. We must think differently and act charitably. That includes the provision of protective equipment to your employees, sanitizers at entrances and exits, further limiting store access to no more than 10 people at any time, and enhanced wipe down protocols for all carts and surfaces.

Please do not place City administrators in a position of having to dictate policy, later, when you have the opportunity to self-regulate, now. Your ideas are needed. For those of you who have put measures in place – thank you! It appears, given the continued spread of the virus, even further actions are necessary.

I look forward to receiving your input, as we work together seeking a return to some degree of normalcy.

Stay safe. Be well.