July 1, 2020

Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 110001
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

RE: Request for State Consultation in Developing Homer-specific COVID-19 Mitigation Plan

Dear Governor Dunleavy,

The City of Homer thanks you and your administration for early implementation of statewide health mandates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that minimized the number of illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths in Alaska. The early action allowed hospitals and state agencies to prepare, municipal incident command teams and emergency operations centers (EOCs) to establish, essential and other businesses and organizations to develop and implement operational plans, and Alaska residents to develop an understanding of the novel coronavirus and methods to maintain personal and community safety and health.

Since state health mandates were lifted during May as part of the Reopen Alaska Responsibly plan, Homer’s City Council and EOC have become alarmed by the outbreak of cases in our city and elsewhere on the southern Kenai Peninsula for which Homer serves as a hub. The southern Kenai Peninsula accounts for 2% of Alaska’s population, but carries 10% of the State’s COVID-19 cases. Recently, Homer’s infection rate was three times that of Anchorage, initiated by an outbreak that followed gatherings during Memorial Day weekend.

Since the start of the pandemic in Alaska, Homer’s EOC has successfully coordinated access to resources to implement mitigation mandates and managed a robust area-wide public information campaign with positive messaging about methods to protect our community through a variety of media including messaging on lighted signs along major roadways. Yet, out of state travelers are entering our city and not abiding by mandates to test and/or quarantine. Large gatherings have occurred in which participants do not maintain physical distance or wear masks. Individuals choose to
not wear masks when shopping at local businesses and sometimes become highly agitated when asked by a business to wear a mask.

Because of the current outbreak in our area, Homer’s public library remains largely closed to the public, though many in our community rely on the library for computer and internet access. The city continues to implement measures to safely open other city buildings (such as City Hall and Harbormaster’s Office) but is reluctant to unnecessarily expose city employees to infection.

As a first class city, Homer does not have health powers and cannot implement a city-wide mitigation plan on our own. The Department of Health and Social Services has made it clear through the Reopen Alaska Responsibly process that you are willing to work with individual communities to support local mitigation needs. Homer’s City Council requests that you assign staff to consult with city staff and unified command team members (including South Peninsula Hospital and Homer-based state public health nurses) to develop a Homer-specific mitigation plan that you can issue on our behalf. Such a plan will provide the City of Homer the flexibility to respond when the local situation worsens but State COVID-19 metrics and mitigation approach remain unchanged.

As you and your staff have wisely said many times, “open is not over.” In Homer we are open and the pandemic is definitely not over! We want Homer to remain open for our local businesses and our residents and visitors to move around our city as freely as possible while looking out for each other’s health and safety. We need the state’s support in developing a mitigation plan. Together we will make a difference.

CITY OF HOMER

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Ken Castner, Mayor

Enclosures: City of Whittier COVID 19 Recovery Plan; City of Seward COVID 19 Recovery Plan; Code Orange Rules

cc: Adam Crum, Commissioner, Department of Health and Social Services
    Dr. Anne Zink, Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health and Social Services
Derotha Ferraro, PIO, South Peninsula Hospital
Lorne Carroll, Public Health Nurse, Homer Public Health Center