



Ohio Travel
ASSOCIATION



September 24, 2020

The Honorable Mike DeWine
Governor's Office
Vern Riffe Center for Government and the Arts
77 South High Street, 30th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215-6117

RE: Mass gathering limits on events and venues

Dear Governor DeWine,

The businesses, organizations and professionals that make up Ohio's travel economy are grateful for the many positive steps taken by the State of Ohio to balance the need to reduce the spread of COVID-19 with the desire to protect the jobs and livelihoods of the more than 400,000 individuals employed in this sector in our state. The ability to do business in the travel, attractions, meetings, and events sector has allowed these businesses to contribute to Ohio's economic recovery.

At the same time, many of these businesses are still severely limited in the size and type of business they can host. Ohio has opened new opportunities for larger events, including youth, collegiate, amateur, club and professional sports; performing arts; and other venues. We urge consideration of the ability for meetings and event venues of all types, including hotels, convention centers, and others, to host gatherings of reasonable capacity and certain types of events which can be safely executed.

Recent developments underscore the severe and potentially permanent impact the current restrictions will have on Ohio's travel economy. A recent industry analysis found that more than a quarter of hotel loans in the CMBS lending market are headed to foreclosure. (*Historical CMBS Report: An Update on Hotel Commercial Real Estate, Trepp, Aug. 2020.*)

On Sept. 16, the I-X Center Corporation delivered news which underscores the urgent need to provide some flexibility for meeting and event venues when it announced the permanent closure of the 2.2 million square foot I-X Center in Cleveland. Loss of this venue will have a direct and immediate impact on the local economy, as it has hosted large events that cannot be accommodated in that destination's convention center without displacing other important business.

The member businesses of the Ohio Travel Association and Ohio Hotel & Lodging Association continue to be impacted in a similar manner. While these businesses are able to host very limited business under the current state Orders, many are operating at unsustainable levels and will be forced into the same decisions and outcomes – leading to more losses of jobs and tax revenues on a permanent basis.

Throughout the pandemic, our organizations have remained a partner in working with the state on efforts to save lives. We have also shared input on safe steps that can be taken to allow meetings and events business that is commensurate with the activity happening in other sectors.

(continued)

We ask for your support in revisiting some of those ideas now, to apply the many lessons we have learned in the past six months. These include:

- allowing meetings and events venues to establish capacities based on their individual circumstances and environments, using updated COVID-19 compliant plans that meet current state requirements for all events and functions

- allow business meetings and events with reasonable occupancy limits under their own auspices, rather than tying meetings to the requirement of providing banquet and catering. Group meetings of similar sizes could be conducted just as safely – perhaps in some instances even more safely – without the provision of food and beverage


- allow the meetings and events industry to help guide the way for safer gatherings through the dissemination and utilization of detailed guidelines, protocols, plans, standards and resources which are specific to each venue's circumstances and which exceed even the Responsible RestartOhio mandatory requirements and best practices

- reinforce to the public that while Ohio will continue to place the utmost importance on the necessary continuing health and safety protections as our number one priority, meetings and events are indeed permissible when held in accordance with the state's requirements and industry standards which offer even more protections

Our organizations and our members have shared much information with state and local officials since the onset of the pandemic in early March. We continue to update that guidance and are including an updated overview to help illustrate the effort meetings and events venues are putting into fighting COVID-19. (See attached).

Businesses and organizations throughout the travel economy recognize the seriousness of the current challenges faced by our communities. We support efforts to continue protecting health and safety and make Ohio a destination of choice. We remain committed to being a positive force in the fight against COVID-19 and other public health threats. But we are also ready to apply what we have all learned with the reopening steps that have been taken in the past several months to contribute even more to Ohio's recovery.

Thank you for your consideration,


Melinda Huntley
Executive Director
Ohio Travel Association


Joseph Savarise
Executive Director
Ohio Hotel & Lodging Association

Cc: The Honorable Jon Husted, Lt. Governor
Director Lydia L. Mihalik, Ohio Development Services Agency
Acting Director Lance Himes, Ohio Department of Health

Attachments