

COVID 19 **Vail Daily** article noting Eagle County updates May 15, 2020

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Transition begins May 25 with restaurants, playgrounds and lodges allowed to reopen, under strict protocols

Two months after COVID-19 hit Eagle County and closed everything from schools to restaurants to the ski mountains, we have all learned that lockdown conditions are hard.

But according to public health, government and business representatives, the next stage of the county's COVID-19 response may be even tougher. Phase II will offer more freedom of movement, but it will also require more cooperation and personal responsibility. And we all need to get ready to step it up because the transition to the next phase is happening in less than two weeks.

On **May 25**, Eagle County is scheduled to shift from the green/beginner phase of its COVID-19 response to the blue/intermediate level. Patterned on ski terrain descriptions that are ubiquitous to mountain resort areas, the county's [Transition Trail Map](#) lays out not only the standards that will be applied for reopening the local economy following weeks of COVID-19 lockdown, but it also includes target dates for when the shifts will happen.

As county residents gird themselves for the first transition, Vail Daily Editor Nate Peterson moderated a livestream forum Thursday that featured representatives from Vail Valley Partnership, Vail Valley Foundation, Vail Health, Eagle County and the Basalt Chamber. The title of the session was "Community Conversations: Finding a Balance" and its central theme was a discussion of why now is the right time to move forward.

"We can't create a fortress from this virus. It's pretty sneaky," said Becky Larson, disease prevention and control manager for Eagle County Public Health. "We need to look to how we live with this virus for the next two years."

On Monday, **May 25**, restaurants and bars, playgrounds and limited lodging will reopen in Eagle County. There are two major caveats to these reopenings. These **activities will be subject to social distancing protocols and limited to a maximum gathering size.**

And everyone is expected to comply with a set of five commitments of containment:

- I will maintain 6 feet of social distance.
- I will wash my hands often.
- I will cover my face in public.
- I will stay home when I am sick.
- I will get tested immediately if I have symptoms.

The blue/intermediate phase includes welcoming back a **limited** number of **non-resident** visitors. Then, depending on how the blue phase goes, the county may move on to the black diamond phase on June 25 at the earliest. That phase would allow all lodging to open and welcome back all visitors.

Steep learning curve

Eagle County Public Health Director Heath Harmon said there is a division out in the county that mirrors what's happening in the state and nation. There are people who believe current public health orders are over-reaching and others who believe it is dangerous to reopen businesses and public spaces.

"I think it is really important, with the virus being here, to know that it is not going away real soon and there is no cure," Harmon noted. "We can't wait for a vaccine to arrive, but we can utilize what we have learned to take the next steps together. This is the best-balanced approach we can come up with now."

All of the panel members noted it is not sustainable to keep the economy closed until a possible vaccine comes about, projected to be one to two years at the earliest. That means the conversation needs to shift to how to safely reopen businesses and other public services. They stressed that everyone knows a lot more about COVID-19 today than they did back when the first local case was diagnosed on March 6.

"I don't think any of us anticipated being hit as hard as we were in mid-March," said Will Cook, CEO of Vail Health.

But since the peak of the local outbreak, which happened on March 16, the county has been able to increase its capacity to deal with COVID-19 patients and has seen a steady decline in COVID-19 cases.

"For all intents and purposes, we feel the health system is ready to handle the next phase," Cook said. "We know so much more than we did in mid-March."

One of the things that public health officials know is COVID-19 will remain part of our daily reality for some time. The goal is to avoid big exposure spikes as the population moves toward the goal of [herd immunity](#) — a point when the majority of the population (about 60-70%) has immunity to the disease.

"This virus can exponentially grow. We are trying to keep that growth at a slow, manageable level," Larson said.

Behavioral health is a top priority for local health officials as well, as the quarantine, loss of income and other contributors provide another set of difficulties for people in the community.

"The thing that everybody needs to understand is that we are going to move forward in a careful, data-driven way," Cook said. "We have to make sure, at the end of the day, that we are not only being mindful of the virus but also of everything that goes with it."

Everything, including Eagle County's precarious tourism economy.

Economic impact

If Eagle County is going to economically recover from COVID-19, the tourists need to come back, county leaders agree.

"It's who we are. We are a community that welcomes people from all over the world," said Chris Romer, of the Vail Valley Partnership.

But as new public health orders allow more openings, Romer said businesses must comply with the five commitments and require their customers to do the same.

"If we want to be in this together ... business are going to have to take that responsibility, too," he said.

“It’s not the tourist that is the bad guy. It is COVID,” said Kris Mattera, of the Basalt Chamber. “I look at the five commitments as our version of the skier’s code. Don’t be the guy on the mountain that everyone is looking at and saying, ‘Why is he doing that?’”

“The freedom to move forward to the next level comes at a pretty sharp price of being responsible,” Cook agreed.

And what if people fail to take on that mantle? Larson noted that the county has an aggressive testing program in place and weeks before a crisis hits, the data will show unacceptable exposure spikes. That will give public health officials time to respond to potential problems.

And now, after weeks of sharing the common goal of stopping the spread of COVID-19, county residents will be challenged to accept a new paradigm. As more businesses, programs and services reopen, COVID-19 will spread. The goal is to minimize the risk and ensure we have the medical capacity to deal with it.

“There are no scenarios where the risk equals zero. That is not a choice we have,” said Eagle County Commissioner Kathy Chandler-Henry. “But personal responsibility is what has gotten us to this point and hopefully it will carry us through.”

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