

## Chamber, churches, nonprofits, others may play role in county reopening

- Michael D. Bates
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Matthew Beck

Commissioner Jimmie T. Smith said it appears the coronavirus curve in Citrus County has flattened and the public is anxious to open the county as long as it's done safely and methodically.

"We need to make sure that we speak with one voice in a way that is appropriate to the situation."

The Citrus County Chamber of Commerce wants to be involved in the reopening of the county and fired off an email to County Commissioner Jimmie T. Smith letting him know they are standing by.

Gov. Ron DeSantis recently formed a Re-Open Florida Task Force and asked each local chamber of commerce to advise local leaders on business issues.

Chamber president/CEO Josh Wooten told Smith he and his staff are pulling together members of the Citrus Business Alliance (CBA) to be part of the local COVID-19 recovery team. The CBA is a cross-section of economic, civic and community leaders.

"The governor recognizes that each community is different, has different needs and timeframes, and we agree," Wooten said. "It is important that we hear from those closest to the ground as we move forward."

Smith said he's supportive of the chamber's input during reopening, but asked Wooten to expand the stakeholders to also include others affected by the closing of the economy. That includes representatives from local churches, nonprofits, restaurants and others.

"The more the merrier, as long as it's not duplicative," said Smith, who prefers having one representative from each economic and social sector so as not to make the ad hoc group too unwieldy.

Wooten said he's on board with expanding the number of participants.



"I don't have a problem with adding medical, nonprofit, education and churches to the group while the pandemic is going on," he said.

Smith said he envisions this group as being an extension of the CBA and doesn't need the county commission's support, although he would welcome and expect it. Details, he said, will be forthcoming.

Smith said the coronavirus curve in Citrus County has flattened and bases that on the fact that the number of cases has not drastically increased as it has in the past.

The public, he said, is anxious to open the county as long as it's done safely and methodically.

"People want to recreate, people want to go to church," he said. "They want a sense of normalcy in their life. Humans are a community and not made to be alone."

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