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March 20, 2020

The Honorable Jay Inslee, Governor
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Re: COVID-19 and Home Construction

Dear Governor Inslee:

On behalf of the nearly 500 member companies of Olympia Master Builders (OMB), which covers Thurston, Mason, Grays Harbor and Pacific Counties, I am writing to urge you to consider policy proposals to support the housing sector of the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. OMB members stand with you during these trying times and we look to your leadership to help steer our state during these uncertain times. To help stabilize the housing sector in the near-term, we are asking you to designate home construction, repair, maintenance, housing industry inspections by local government, and industry-related transportation as an “Essential Infrastructure Business” in the State of Washington. As cities and states issue declarations and public health orders as a result of the crisis, it is essential that communities have access to our professionals to build and maintain essential home services including: building, plumbing, electrical, roofing, HVAC systems, waste/wastewater treatment plants and power generations. Home construction, repair and maintenance should be designated as “essential” because it is necessary to maintain safety, sanitation, and economic security.

Please consider these four main policy concerns:

- Recognize that construction, repair, and maintenance of housing is essential and should be allowed to continue under a ‘remain in place’ order;
- Government functions related to the building, repair, maintenance and development process, such as inspections, permitting and plan review services can be modified to protect the public health, but fundamentally should continue and serve the construction and repair of housing (e.g., allow qualified private third-party inspections in case of government shutdown);
- Supply stores necessary to serve the construction, repair and maintenance of housing should be allowed to operate; and
- Those working in building trades must be allowed to continue to maintain the essential operation of residences and other operating businesses.

Our industry continues to adhere to public health guidelines set forth by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

According to OSHA, “Lower exposure risk (caution) jobs are those that do not require contact with people known to be, or suspected of being, infected with SARS-CoV-2 nor frequent close contact with (i.e., within 6 feet of) the general

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public. Workers in this category have minimal occupational contact with the public and other coworkers.” (Source: Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19, p.20.)

A large majority, if not all, land development and residential construction job tasks fall within OSHA’s Lower Exposure Risk jobs. Obviously, working on a new unfinished home site occurs primarily outdoors and does not involve going onto a location occupied by residents or a public location, and there is minimal (if any) physical or transactional contact with customers compared to other customer/client relationships.

Homebuilding (including remodeling and repair) is highly regulated and therefore cannot occur without support from the local jurisdiction where it occurs. Builders require governmental approvals and permits to begin a project and they are needed through project completion. Inspections occur along the entire process from the land development to final certificate of occupancy. Residential construction requires that government building and zoning departments continue to operate. Furthermore, for the safety and wellbeing of current and future occupants, governments must allow inspections to occur in a timely manner.

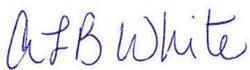
The inspection process may benefit from modifications. For example, if possible, inspectors may work “off hours” to minimize any contact with the construction team. Or they can make other arrangements with the owner or general contractor to safeguard their health by ensuring nobody will be on site during an inspection.

Furthermore, certain localities use third-party engineers to sign off on inspections. It may be necessary for home builders to request this option if local governments are closing their building department during the pandemic. Housing is currently 14.6% of Gross Domestic Product and a major engine of the economy, nationally and here in Washington. Keeping the men and women of the industry building must be a priority. If construction is disrupted, it creates a domino effect leading to dire negative economic repercussions for an already-burdened economy. I request that you consider construction, housing industry inspections by local government, and industry-related transportation an essential service, so that individuals may continue to perform work necessary to the operations and maintenance of “Essential Infrastructure.” OMB greatly appreciates your leadership and the work of your staff and those who are spending every waking hour keeping us safe.

Sincerely,



John Erwin
2020 President



Angela White
Executive Officer

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