



B.C. Government Restart Plan Outlines Phased Strategy for Increased Social and Economic Activity – But Many Unanswered Questions and Details Remain

May 6, 2020

B.C. Premier John Horgan has released British Columbia's plan to gradually re-open the province in a slow, measured way amidst a flattening of the COVID-19 curve. The Government is characterizing this as a plan to "restart B.C. safely" by transitioning the province to a "new normal" with four phases of gradually relaxed restrictions over the coming months beginning in mid-May. But there was also a firm message that until a vaccine is found, broad treatment is available, or there is widespread community immunity; international travel, conventions, concerts, or any large event with more than 50 people will not be allowed.

Despite today's plan, a great deal of uncertainty remains about how individual businesses or organizations can or should resume operations, not to mention the larger question of how COVID-19 will ultimately impact British Columbia's economy. Today's re-opening strategy did not include any details on additional measures to support that economic recovery, individual businesses/organizations, or any further supports for individuals, although the Premier did say further announcements are coming.

B.C.'s Restart Plan: A phased approach

Phase 1: Nearly complete

Prior to today's announcement, Dr. Henry, Minister Dix, and Premier Horgan cautioned that B.C.'s plan will not resemble the 're-opening' plans announced in other Canadian provinces because unlike those jurisdictions, B.C. allowed most businesses to continue operating with some modifications in place. The government says this allows B.C. to begin its plan at the tail-end of Phase 1, ready to proceed to Phase 2 after the May long weekend.

Phase 2: A slow re-opening beginning May 19

Phase 2 will include small social gatherings, a resumption of elective surgeries and regulated health services, the re-opening of provincial parks for day use, the re-opening of more non-essential businesses providing that they have safe operations plans, as well as recalling the provincial legislature.

During this phase, government says it will build on the efforts of essential businesses that remained open to adapt best practices and industry-specific guidance to give employees and customers

confidence. Sectors that were ordered to close will be required to work with WorkSafeBC to develop plans for a safe eventual re-opening.

Phase 3: June-to-September

Phase 3 will only proceed if transmission rates remain low or continue to decline and will involve opening more additional businesses and services. This is when British Columbians can expect to see a resumption of the film and TV production sector, the re-opening of businesses like movie theatres, personal services like spas and salons, as well as the resumption of camping and hotel/resort operations, all of which will be required to operate with strict safety protocols in place. It should be noted on hotels and resorts that out of province and international travel is still not recommended and that people are being urged to stay close to home.

In September, parents can also expect the K-12 school system to re-open fully, with screening in place to ensure staff and students are healthy, as well as smaller class sizes.

Phase 4: Post-COVID (timing unknown)

Phase 4 will only be achieved when COVID-19 is no longer a risk, due to an effective treatment, vaccination, or evidence of community immunity. Until British Columbia reaches Phase 4, there will be no rock concerts, conventions, or large gatherings of more than 50 people.

Resumption of business, but not business-as-usual

With 400,000 British Columbians having applied for the provincial government's Emergency Worker Benefit Program over the past week, the Premier acknowledged it will take time to absorb workers back into the economy, just as it will take time for businesses and sectors required to do so to work with WorkSafe to develop re-opening plans.

As employers prepare for a resumption of operations, those closed by the province will be required by WorkSafeBC to have a plan in place to assess the risk of COVID-19 transmission as well as measures in place to reduce these risks. WorkSafeBC advises that it will be engaging directly with employers and workers in returning industries.

Dr. Henry and Minister Dix have advised in previous briefings that business operators should familiarize themselves with administrative and engineering controls that minimize the potential for the virus to spread and that will give employees and consumers confidence that businesses are safe. Depending on the business, measures could include: limiting the number of people inside a space at a given time, migrating to a hybrid online/in-person business model, installing plexiglass barriers or redesigning spaces to minimize contact, requiring the use of non-medical PPE, and limiting the size of meetings or gatherings to allow for physical distancing. These, as well as a reduction in non-essential travel will be part of our 'new normal' across the province.

No back to school until Fall for most students

Full in-classroom schooling for all K-12 students in B.C. is not expected to resume until Fall, although it is expected that some additional in-classroom learning will resume between now and the end of June. There have been conflicting reports out of different school districts regarding this timing, but the Premier emphasized that all students won't be back in classrooms until September.



Supporting those who are sick to stay home from work

One of the most important aspects related to the resumption of business will be the ability for people to stay home when they feel ill. In today's announcement, the Premier echoed his previous comments about the need for a societal and economic adjustment towards the idea that working sick is not a commendable practice. Government has already amended the *Employment Standards Act* to add two new categories of job protected leave – unpaid leave related to COVID-19 and three days of unpaid leave in connection with a personal illness or injury – but the increased talk of the need for employees to not fear a financial penalty when taking sick leave suggests the likelihood of future government action in the area of mandatory paid leave or an expansion of some sort of sick leave benefit program that workers can access.

Socializing in an era of physical distancing

In today's announcement, the province signalled that it won't be giving people explicit permission to do things like have family members over for dinner, visit summer homes, or travel. Instead, they are counting on British Columbians to have good judgment and to act collectively to limit opportunity for the spread of the virus. The Premier is asking British Columbians to stay close to home even though provincial parks will be opening; even though people have the legal right to travel to their second homes, he is asking them to be conscious of the full-time residents of vacation communities and their limited access to the health care system.

Summer staples like concerts, festivals, conventions, and gatherings of more than 50 people will remain off the table until there is community immunity, but BC Parks will re-open on May 14, and summer league sports may be able to resume in a modified fashion.

Managing until we have a vaccine

Like other Canadian provinces, B.C.'s economy is not entirely of its own making. The ability for goods and people to move unencumbered across borders, the economic wellbeing of trading partners, and the ebb and flow of the pandemic outside of our province are largely out of the B.C. government's control but all have a direct impact on the financial and social well-being of the province. British Columbians should expect government to be making constant adjustments in our collective "standard operating procedure" until a vaccine is found, as the province attempts to deal with factors that are largely outside of its control.

The provincial government has already hinted that it intends to examine areas of the economy and of society that bore a disproportionate amount of the impact of the pandemic. These areas likely include long term care homes and the precarious employment situations that force workers to move between multiple care facilities to make ends meet; meat packing plants, industrial camps, and prisons where people are in close proximity to each other for extended periods of time; homeless and hard-to-house populations whose living conditions made social distancing and increased handwashing difficult; and rural and remote communities that lack the health care infrastructure to deal with the surge in COVID-19 cases that could be caused by just one sick visitor.

Remaining Questions

Although today's plan provided a great deal of re-opening information, there are many remaining health and economic recovery questions. For example, there was very little guidance around when businesses that closed voluntarily can or should re-open. The best response at this point remains that those who can continue to work remotely should do so over the medium term. Inter-provincial travel is also a grey area in terms of



when restrictions might be eased. Rules and suggestions for childcare operators was also an area raised at today's news conference without any substantive answers or guidance. Similarly, there was no information provided about how the public could start to use public transit again in greater numbers without putting themselves or others at risk.

However, the biggest unknown moving forward for many businesses is what economic recovery measures the province might put in place. Although a recovery taskforce has been assembled, there were no indications or hints from the Premier about what stimulus programs or other supports could be on the table to help organizations recover. The B.C. Liberal Opposition has suggested a number of measures such as a suspension of the Employer Health Tax, Provincial Sales Tax, and the Hotel Tax. However, none of those options were addressed today by the Premier, he only hinted at additional measures to come.

Reminder of supports

A full list of provincial and federal supports is available at:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/financial-benefits>