



# Mathews & Maxwell, Inc.

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## **Weekly Legislative Report # 15**

**Week Ending April 24, 2020**

Gov. Brian Kemp decided to go bold last week, announcing on Monday that he would begin relaxing Coronavirus shelter-in-place restrictions. The [new order, 4.23.20.2](#), signed Thursday, allowed many businesses, including nail and tattoo parlors, bowling alleys, gyms and hair salons to re-open on Friday. The 26-page directive contained several long lists of “shall,” “may,” or “should” regulations providing guidance for those shops that opt to re-open. Restaurants were given a delayed re-opening date of this Monday for sit-down dining. They are saddled with 39 constraints and must conform to a layout of no more than 10 dine-in customers per 500 square feet of floor space. Bars are not yet permitted to re-open, but ambulatory surgical centers have been okayed to perform elective procedures again. There are also sections of the order detailing rules for both Critical and “Not Critical” Infrastructure to re-engage business practices.

### **Testing, Testing, Testing**

Most commentators appear in agreement that the appropriate timing for re-opening business is generally dependent on where we stand in “the curve” of the epidemic and how well we can contact trace people who have interacted with infected, even if asymptomatic, persons. There is significant disagreement on what the statistics are telling us. An integral part of that equation is how much actual testing is available, can be done quickly (hours instead of days), and its reliability. The Governor and his Coronavirus response team acknowledge that more testing is needed in Georgia, but also declare that a boom in testing availability is in the works.

Problems are rarely as simple to solve as we would like. One hiccup that we’ve come across is the fact that different testing machines are geared to their own particular type of testing swabs. Thus, a swab taken from a patient’s throat at a particular drive-through site may be tested only on a machine calibrated for that style swab. It cannot necessarily be sent to a lab with the shortest wait time. Also, machines that give results in a short amount of time are limited to the number of tests they can do concurrently. Operations that can process hundreds of tests simultaneously have a longer turn-around time. The technology and organization for testing is being updated on a daily basis, suggesting improved, more consistent, response times in the near future.

## **Unemployment Claims Gradually Dropping**

Initial unemployment claims dropped for the second consecutive week in Georgia. For the week ending April 18, claims were down 24 percent compared to the week ending April 11. Over the past month, one million Georgians have filed unemployment claims, more than the previous three years combined. As businesses re-open, some employees will be called back to work, perhaps on a part-time basis. An emergency rule will allow those employees to earn up to \$300 per week without reducing the amount of their unemployment insurance payments. Those who do return to jobs are still eligible to collect for the weeks they were out of work.

## **The General Assembly Will Reconvene on TBD.**

While discussions are being held behind the scenes, an official announcement has not yet been made concerning the General Assembly reconvening to finish its 2020 legislative session. Only one remaining duty is Constitutionally mandated – passage of the FY2021 budget. However, Speaker David Ralston has said a few other items might also be on the agenda. “Not everybody’s bills are going to be taken up,” he said. “We’ll look at what we absolutely must consider and everything else will push to next year.”

Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan threw out May 14 as a possible re-start time based on the need for state agencies and school systems to know their budgets in order to plan for the fiscal year starting July 1. A basic calculation they need to resolve soon is, “How many teachers or employees can we hire?” However, Ralston said he preferred June 11, two days after the primary election date. June 11 would not only allow more time for the COVID-19 epidemic to fade, it would give the Revenue Department time to collect and publish more recent revenue receipts, providing a better reflection of the anticipated tax collection drop-off.

Newly appointed Senate Appropriations Chair Blake Tillery (R-Vidalia) has said subcommittee chairs should be discussing with state agencies how they plan to deal with the expected recession. House Appropriations subcommittees are expected to begin having in-person meetings in May. Again, nothing official yet.

## **On Again, Off Again Resignation**

Rep. Vernon Jones (D-Lithonia) made news, day after day, last week with sensational announcements. First, he declared he was endorsing Donald Trump for President, a position that put him at odds with fellow Democrats in the state. The negative reaction to his endorsement was so strong that he subsequently announced he would cut short his current term in the state House and would discontinue his bid for reelection in November. “Turn the lights off, I have left the plantation,” Jones, who represents a heavily Democratic district, said in a statement. Finally, saying his public demanded he stay in the fight, Jones announced he was rescinding his resignation announcement and that he would continue his current service and his bid for reelection . . . and maintain his support for Trump. The Democratic Party has considered various ways to punish Jones, arguing that his real goal is simply to land a paid position with the Trump campaign or ancillary organization.

## **COVID-19 UPDATE**

As of noon on Sunday, the [Georgia Department of Public Health](#) reports 23,401 COVID-19 cases and 912 deaths in Georgia.