

IDEAS

Atlanta Isn't Ready to Reopen—And Neither Is Georgia

As the mayor of Atlanta, I'm unable to endorse the governor's decision to reopen businesses before health experts say it's safe to do so.

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60th Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia



PARAS GRIFFIN / GETTY

Atlanta faces unusual challenges as we cope with the ongoing pandemic. The political reality is that we are a blue city in a red state, trying to balance public-health concerns in a diverse environment while getting our economy back on track as soon as possible.

As the mayor of Georgia's largest city, I expressed opposition to Governor Brian Kemp's recent order allowing certain businesses—dine-in restaurants, gyms, hair and nail salons, barbershops, tattoo parlors and bowling alleys—to reopen before health experts say doing so is safe. I hope the day for Atlanta to endorse such a move will come soon, but it is not here yet.



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Reopening the state and relaxing social-distancing measures now is irresponsible and could even be deadly. Our hospitals may not be stretched to capacity, but that does not mean we should work to fill the vacant beds. I strongly believe that our health-care system is not overwhelmed *because* we have been socially distancing. And while staying at home may be inconvenient for many people, there is nothing essential about going to a bowling alley during a pandemic. We need to continue to do whatever it takes to keep the number of cases from rising.

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Although Governor Kemp and I have had a good working relationship, mayors across Georgia, including myself, were denied the opportunity to provide input on his decision to ease social-distancing restrictions, which directly affects the towns and cities that we lead. Even in COVID-19 hot spots such as Albany, Georgia, which has per capita infection rates on par with New York City's, the mayor learned of the governor's decision with the rest of the public, during an evening press conference last week.

I may not have the legal authority to override the state. I do have the right to use my voice to encourage people to exercise common sense, listen to the science, follow guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and stay home, if at all possible. We will transition to opening Atlanta when the health experts tell us that it is safe, and we will be a stronger city because of our prudence and deliberation.

In a normal world, we could look to the president of the United States and receive sound, practical advice. Instead, we have to caution people not to ingest and inject their bodies with household cleaners.

As Georgia's densest city, we are being thoughtful in establishing a timeline for reopening—a timeline that takes into consideration our most vulnerable populations and the workers who risk their safety once they return to work. To ensure that I provide Atlanta citizens with the most informed guidance, I recently established an advisory council for reopening Atlanta. The council is composed of public officials, health experts and private-sector leaders who will advise us on the safest and most efficient process for reopening our city. These partners will help create a framework for reopening our businesses, tourist sites, entertainment venues, houses of worship, and stadiums.

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I know firsthand how hard it is for mom-and-pop shops and other local businesses to sustain their operations when they are hit by economic factors outside their control. When I was a teenager, I worked in the hair salon that my mother owned in Atlanta. The men and women I met there changed my life. They believed in me. They encouraged me. They taught me about how people in a community support one another.

Small businesses like my mother's shop are indeed "essential" enterprises. But I also know from personal experience that social distancing is impossible while shampooing or cutting a customer's hair. The workers in these industries should not be forced to choose between going back to work at this crucial time and forfeiting their jobs and livelihoods. To provide some relief for these workers, I have created a relief fund for beauty salons and barbershops affected by the pandemic.

We should also recognize that many of the kinds of businesses that are reopening are especially popular in African American neighborhoods, where barbershops and hair salons are ubiquitous. This concerns me because we continue to see much higher rates of infection and death occurring among African Americans than in other communities. I and other mayors recently signed a letter addressed to President Trump, urging states and other entities that receive federal funds to collect and report race and ethnicity data by zip code in real time. We also requested additional funding for institutions of higher learning, including historically black colleges and universities, to conduct research on medical, social, and public-health disparities relating to COVID-19. We need to do much more to close the income and health gaps that render people of color more susceptible to this disease.

[Ibram X. Kendi: *Stop blaming black people for dying of the coronavirus*]

I am reminded that we cannot let racism divide our country and pit communities against each other. Last week I was attacked in ugly racial terms on my personal phone, with my children nearby, for speaking out on the side of science for the safety of our residents and businesses. Cowardice like this does not deter me. As the poet Audre Lorde said, "I am deliberate and afraid of nothing." Remaining silent during this crisis will not protect us.

I will continue to advocate for the least-advantaged among us and everyone in Atlanta, the historic birthplace of the civil-rights movement, and a place with a legacy for bringing people together and moving our country forward.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.