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SAM HODGSON / U-T

Eric Zufall enjoys a drink while seated at an indoor table at Waterfront Bar & Grill in Little Italy on Monday. Normally, capacity at the Waterfront would be 146 people inside; for now, that will be cut to just 25 percent or no more than 37 people.

BUSINESSES BEGIN TO REOPEN INDOOR SPACES

Restaurants, bars, salons, gyms welcome customers inside under new state guidelines

BY PAUL SISSON
& LYNDSAY WINKLEY

Despite cries from some to go faster or slower than the pace set by Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday, Dr. Wilma Wooten, San Diego's public health officer, largely stuck with the state's new rules that allowed a wide range of businesses to resume varying levels of indoor activity.

There were a few new public health orders announced, including one that all businesses now reopening keep logs with names and phone numbers of everyone they serve to make it easier to track people if a COVID-19 outbreak is detected.

Overall, Wooten's take on the move back indoors seemed to be: Now it's up to you.

Continuing to meet the state's requirements, she said, will come down to whether the community can collectively hew to facial covering, hand-washing and distancing requirements even as they begin to move more freely.

"If people do not do what we are asking them to do, we will find ourselves in the very same situation that we did in mid-July," Wooten said.

The new reopening rules arrive just as local K-12 schools regain the ability to bring students back to campuses. Because the local number of cases per 100,000 residents stayed lower than 100 through Monday, school districts, by state decree, will regain their reopening powers today.

It did not appear, though, that there would be immediate lines of

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parents waiting to drop their kids off. Though some private elementary schools have already reopened after being granted waivers, most districts will wait weeks or months to bring students back, and many, even then, will ease into in-person education, rather than trying to go from empty to full classrooms at once.

The county announced 304 new cases Monday, two additional community outbreaks and no additional COVID-related deaths.

While Wooten has, for the most

part, gone along with the state's new reopening plan, that does not mean that everyone agrees.

County Supervisor Jim Desmond has been by far the most vocal detractor, holding a news conference at the County Administration Center on Monday to say that the uneven nature of relaxed restrictions are unfair for businesses that have struggled to stay open for months.

Salons and barbershops, for example, were allowed to use 100 percent of their facilities, provided proper 6-foot spacing, and a range of other infection control requirements, were met. Restaurants, though, can only use 25 percent of their indoor capacity.

The state's reopening framework says that those percentages

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COVID • Some business operators say rules are still too restrictive

FROM A1
were determined by careful study of the risks associated with different types of venues. Places where people might need to talk loudly, sing or otherwise expectorate without a mask are seen as riskier than those where everyone can easily wear a mask at all times.

Desmond, joined by more than two dozen business and community leaders, did not address the state's nuanced risk assessment but said that allowing uneven reopening levels will kill some business.

"These rules are arbitrary and inconsistent and businesses can't survive at these capacities," Desmond said.

Supervisor Nathan Fletcher said Friday that he thought the state's reopening plan was too fast, especially as schools and universities begin to reopen, events that everyone knows will increase the overall number of local cases.

Others in the community appeared to agree.

A group of UC San Diego professors and local parents, many of them with kids in local grade schools, sent a

letter to the county board and Wooten Monday asking for the reopening plan to be "delayed until October 1" especially in light of recognition that the novel coronavirus is airborne and "thus the highest risk of transmission occurs in crowded indoor locations."

It was not clear whether Wooten had received the letter before her remarks Monday afternoon.

Across the county, businesses that hadn't already opened their doors to the public were preparing to welcome customers once again. Some found themselves crossing their fingers, hoping more closures weren't in their future.

Restaurants

Some San Diego County restaurants were ready to begin indoor seating first thing Monday morning while others were still rearranging furniture to adhere to new guidelines.

Johan Engman owns 18 eateries, including 10 Breakfast Republic restaurants that were ready to seat a limited number of customers as soon as the new regulations went into effect.

"We're right there with everybody else, just trying to get through this and navigate seemingly weekly changes," he said of the new health order.

In addition to the 25 percent occupancy rule and re-

quirements that tables remain at least 6 feet apart, the county added a regulation Monday that will require diners who sit indoors at



Goodonya restaurant owner Kris Fillat-Buchanan (left) and employee Valerie Telnack move a table at the Encinitas natural food eatery Monday in preparation for offering indoor dining.

restaurants to wear a face mask except when they are eating and drinking. Currently, diners must wear a face covering until they are seated, and that will still be the case for those who sit outside.

Engman wonders whether people will even want to sit indoors during the pandemic. Still, despite being far from operating at full capacity, the restaurateur was grateful for the changes.

"Anything that's a step in the right direction is great," he said.

In Encinitas on Monday, Goodonya restaurant owner Kris Buchanan was preparing to welcome guests into the restaurant once again — albeit far fewer than usual. Buchanan said, at 25 percent capacity, she'll be able to have four to six seats indoors.

The restaurant, like many others, has struggled during the pandemic, but 12 outdoor seats on a newly built patio have kept her afloat. She didn't do it alone. The patio was built through donations of cash, materials and labor from supporters of the natural food eatery.

Buchanan said reopening indoor dining on Wednesday is good timing because the patio will be closed that day as workers build a fence around it.

Bars

Some businesses are taking their time before they reopen.

The on-again, off-again

cycle of openings during the COVID-19 crisis has been unsettling enough that bar owner Chad Cline is holding off on reopening some of his bars so that he has time, he says, to do it in a more organized fashion. Bars that serve food are permitted to reopen under the new state guidelines, while those that do not must remain closed. Many of Cline's venues, before the onslaught of the pandemic, did not serve food to their patrons.

For now, two of his bar-centric locations — the Waterfront Bar & Grill in Little Italy and Harbor Town Pub in Point Loma — are the only ones reopening right away with indoor service at 25 percent capacity. Food is available at those two locations.

"We're still working on building relationships with vendors so we can provide food at our spots like the Aero Club and Club Marina," said Cline, a co-owner. "They just told us on Friday about this. We didn't know if it would be September, October, November. We just want to make sure we're being smart about everything and not do something that feels like a ragtag opening. People have been waiting a long time to go out and have a drink and something to eat, and we want to make sure we're not throwing it at them just because we can."

Normally, capacity at the Waterfront would be 146 people inside, so for now, that will be cut to just 25 percent, which is no more than

your leg, would you be happy?" Cline said of the new guidelines. "I hope nobody at the county is saying, 'Congratulations, I put out the fire on your leg.'"

Gyms

Gym owners say there's not much prep work to do this time around, as they already went through the reopening process earlier this summer. Gyms were briefly allowed to reopen in June but had to shut back down weeks later in July.

Now, reservation sys-

tems are already in place, thermometers are purchased, sanitation stations are installed, and equipment is spaced. Most are ready to reopen their doors right away. But some may not want to.

Fitness centers, hit with one of the most stringent caps on occupancy under the state's new rules, can only fill their buildings to 10 percent of their total capacity.

Scott Lutwak, the CEO of a local chain of luxury gyms in San Diego called Fit Athletic Club, said the cap will force him to operate at a 90 percent profit margin. "It's impossible to expect a business to function at 10 percent their capacity," Lutwak said. "Do they think we've been operating at a 90 percent profit margin? No business in the world does that. We service a lot of customers at a small margin. Take away that volume and

you can't survive."

Even so, Fit is opening all five of its clubs by tomorrow at 6 a.m.

"We're just hoping that 10 percent rule won't last long," Lutwak said.

Many gyms have already taken advantage of San Diego's temporary ease on permitting to move their operations outside, although this option is less feasible for businesses in less temperate regions of the state.

Salons

Carlos Martinez, owner of Reo Shave Co. in Paradise Hills, was cutting a customer's hair on Monday when someone called to ask if the barbershop was opened yet. "It's a relief to be open," he said, adding that he hopes the shop can slowly get back to what it was before the pandemic.

Customers are required to wear face masks and they must wait in their car before their appointment to limit the number of people inside. And despite the name, the shop is not offering shaving services.

Martinez, who has been cutting hair for more than 10 years, opened Reo Shave Co.

in 2017. He said it was his dream since he first learned to cut hair; however, the back and forth with closing and reopening is making him consider a different career.

"I don't think they are going to stop shutting us down until there is a vaccine," Martinez said.

Businesses still on hold

Though the new state rules allow public libraries to open at 50 percent capacity, and county officials said Monday that they're examining how to make that happen, many other businesses, like those involving live events, are still waiting for permission to start up again — a circumstance some business leaders feel is unfair.

Laurel McFarlane, founder of the San Diego Event Coalition, said that while other industries are allowed to modify their practices, the event business has been left out in the cold.

She added that other businesses that are very similar to events have been allowed to reopen — like swap meets and farmers markets. While street vendors are allowed to set up at beaches and public parks, they can't participate in a regulated street fair.

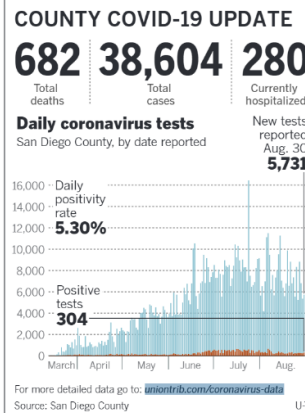
"We are happy that these businesses are operating, but it's complete hypocrisy that these categories are open — they operate just like

an event," McFarlane said.

McFarlane asked that county and state leaders sit down with event professionals and work out a set of regulations that would allow these businesses to reopen during the pandemic.

Staff writers Brittany Meiling, Gary Warth, Andrea Lopez Villafra and Lori Weisberg contributed to this report.

Paul Sisson
@sduniontribune.com
lyndsaywinkley
@sduniontribune.com



37 people. While Cline expects to still be losing money with those limitations, he will at least come closer to breaking even, he says. Last month, his Harbor Town Pub, for instance, lost \$3,000, a marked improvement over the month before when it suffered a \$20,000 loss, he said.

"If your whole body is on fire and someone doused

percent of their total capacity."

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San Diego Union-Tribune features Breakfast Republic

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