

FOR RELEASE: July 24, 2020

FROM: The Monroe County Board of Commissioners (Julie Thomas, Lee Jones, and Penny Githens) and Members of the Monroe County Council (Eric Spoonmore, Kate Wiltz, Trent Deckard, Peter Iversen, Geoff McKim, and Cheryl Munson)

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, Monroe County government has worked diligently to address the needs of the community. We did not wait for guidance from the Bloomington Mayor. While the Mayor is expected to provide guidance and direction for the Bloomington City Government, we were surprised to read admonitions and suggestions for County Government. Among the many ways that Monroe County has been leading:

- We provided \$35,000 to area food banks – each of which reported a spike in client needs. The Hoosier Hills Food Bank acknowledged this support by naming Monroe County as one of their 19 Heroes in 2020 because we were the first government entity to provide them with funding;
- We provided \$10,000 to Mother Hubbard’s Cupboard, a local community food resource center, to help them provide additional meals to local residents;
- We utilized Food and Beverage funding to provide nearly \$400,000 in grants to local businesses and organizations to ameliorate some of the losses they experienced due to the pandemic. These are grants - not loans - which contrasts significantly with the response from the City of Bloomington;
- We have made \$100,000 available to our Townships to provide direct assistance for area residents. Residents impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic who need assistance with rent or utilities have been encouraged to reach out to their Township Trustee. We made this offer of additional money to the townships weeks before the mayor “urged” us to expand our support for eviction protection. The County has committed to make additional funds available as they are needed;
- We have a second program in place to reduce evictions: The Monroe County Unified Court system has established and obtained grant monies for a Housing and Eviction Resource project. This project aims to reduce eviction, preserve housing, provide comprehensive access to social services, educate landlords and tenants of their legal rights and responsibilities, develop marketing strategies to promote availability of the table, improve court efficiencies and outcomes, and improve overall housing stability for renters in Monroe County. The project management and mediation services are provided by the Community Justice and Mediation Center. The “genius” of this project is that not only are pro bono legal resources provided, but low-barrier social services and mediation are also available onsite. (We thank Judges Stafford and Benckart for their foresight and leadership in creating this program.);
- We provided \$25,000 in emergency funding to the United Way of Monroe County;
- On Monday July 27th, we will begin to distribute CARES money to our local businesses and non-profits. The program will cover the cost of additional goods and supplies

needed to protect employees and customers during the pandemic – expenses not reimbursed through other programs.

Our efforts to maintain our local economy benefit every resident – now and in the future – ensuring businesses can reopen and stay open, keeping area residents employed and keeping our community safe.

While it is heartening to see that the Mayor has reconsidered the one-half of one percent (0.5%) local income tax increase he put forward several months ago, we are concerned that his proposed 0.25% local income tax increase is neither necessary nor expedient given the current economic circumstances. During this pandemic, we believe the estimated \$4 million dollars per annum that could be raised by such a tax increase would better serve our community if it is left in the hands of Monroe County residents. We see an income tax increase at this time, a proposal which runs counter to the notion of counter-cyclical economics, as an unwanted and unnecessary burden on our residents. For those unfamiliar with the term, counter-cyclical fiscal policy increases government spending and reduces taxes during a recession, putting money into the hands of people. The mayor proposes to increase both. We are not sure what fiscal classification his proposal would fall into, but it has the potential to cause a downward spiral of the County's economy if he is able to persuade enough members of the City Council to follow his logic and pass both spending and taxing increases.

In addition to this important work, your County government is continuing with other efforts to benefit all County residents:

- In 2019, the County initiated a criminal justice reform study with a series of community meetings. The consultants are currently analyzing data and developing a report. Although the pandemic has delayed their work, we are looking forward to implementing a series of changes to ensure a more equitable criminal justice system for our entire community; and
- With the support of the County Council, the Board of Commissioners and the Environmental Commission are pursuing legal action to protect portions of the Hoosier National Forest from logging and burning and to protect Lake Monroe, the County's drinking water supply.

Months before the Mayor encouraged Monroe County to take action, County government stepped to the forefront of the local COVID-19 response. The Monroe County Health Department has consistently provided sound guidance, based on data and science. As many of you know, the Health Department is responsible for enforcing compliance with the Health Orders at all of the county's bars and restaurants. This ensures that retail food and drink establishments are safe – both for customers and staff – and that these businesses can remain open. We respectfully request that all local law enforcement work with the Monroe County Health Department to enforce the limit on crowd sizes and the mandate for face coverings. We do not want to see a resurgence of COVID cases of a magnitude that would lead to a second shut-down. Monroe County Emergency Management has also worked tirelessly to coordinate the distribution of face coverings across the county and has organized five blood drives – the

first four were fully booked with donors. Overall, Monroe County employees have continued to serve the public throughout this pandemic.

While the Board of Commissioners and the County Council have not delivered a formal speech on the topic, we have been doing the hard work of responding to the exigencies of COVID-19. We have provided – and continue to provide – direct support for Monroe County residents and businesses, and we continue to do the good work of County government.