

MOVING FORWARD TO THE NEW NORMAL

"We are beginning now to think about what the new normal will be when we come back in," Tarrant County Judge Whitley said Friday, after Gov. Greg Abbott announced some steps in "reopening" Texas to business.

"My hope would be by the end of the first or second week of May, we might be able to lessen restrictions and let some" businesses reopen. Locally, all businesses won't open at once. And those that might reopen first could be limited on how many customers are allowed in stores — and how they are allowed to shop.

Abbott announced that schools will remain closed for the rest of the academic year and state parks will reopen Monday with social distancing and mask requirements in place. Restrictions on surgeries will be loosened next week. Stores may operate "retail to go" starting April 24. And the governor plans to announce additional changes on April 27.

Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price said it may be too early to think of specific dates when businesses could reopen in the city, with the continuing rise in coronavirus cases, because officials have to take both public health and the economy into consideration.

But she said she's glad the governor acknowledged that hospitals have the capacity to handle coronavirus cases, enough to let them also handle some other medical procedures. And she's glad he's incorporating President Donald Trump's guidelines and taking suggestions from local officials.

"I'm thrilled to see the dialogues happening, positive dialogues, about how can we get there, how do we decide what matrix it is and what data will give us the key to getting" to whatever the new normal is, Price said.

She did say that, in the end, she believes "we are going to emerge stronger."

Being prepared

Stay-at-home restrictions were issued last month in Fort Worth and Tarrant County. Whitley said these were needed because of the "horror stories" coming out of New York, where hospitals were overrun with coronavirus patients, running out of beds and equipment needed to treat them.

"To the credit of health care workers and citizens ... everybody started working toward making sure we were ready from a hospital capacity standpoint," Whitley said. "Even though we still continue to see new cases going up, hospitals have seen the number of COVID-19 patients in the hospitals go down a little bit. "They have plenty of available beds. They have done the job we asked them to do — to be prepared for the surge."

Stay-at-home orders required non-essential businesses to close their doors, putting many out of work. Abbott said Friday that at least 1 million Texans have filed for unemployment benefits and that people want to get back to work.

Loosening restrictions

Whitley said he has been talking to county judges and officials throughout the region as advisers are reviewing each sector of business, from hotels to restaurants to salons to retail operations, to determine what can safely reopen. They also will try to find ways to protect employees and customers as much as possible.

Price also created an advisory panel — the Committee On Re-opening the Economy, which is made up of health care and medical experts as well as philanthropic and business leaders — to review criteria and help guide decisions of when businesses can safely reopen.

She said there will be a task force that will weigh in on "when we put more people back to work and potentially attract new businesses."

Some potential changes, Whitley said, could be in the case of restaurants, for instance. Maybe some could open but not at full capacity.

Workers — who would be trained in new health care guidelines — might wear masks; customers might have their temperature taken at the door, Whitley said.

Schools stay closed

Fort Worth school Superintendent Kent Scribner applauded Abbott for following the advice of medical experts in keeping schools closed. And he said he's encouraged at how online classes have been going since last month.

"We will continue that learning process for the remainder of the school year," he said in a statement.

He noted that he's looking forward to working with Texas Education Agency Commissioner Mike Morath and the Texas Education Agency "in determining how we can move forward with continued learning opportunities, such as summer school, and how we can apply lessons we have learned in recent weeks to our anticipated reopening of schools in the fall."

The Fort Worth school year will end May 28. Teachers will work through May 29.

Moving forward

Whitley said the only reason restrictions might lessen locally is because Tarrant residents followed stay-at-home orders and other restrictions.

"I couldn't be prouder of our folks in Tarrant County," he said. "But it's not time to lighten up, to go out and hold gatherings. At least we can begin to plan what the new normal will be."

As some restrictions loosen, Whitley said there will be more cases of coronavirus. And that's why it's important to review data and consult health experts when moving forward — and for the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions to continue to stay at home as much as possible.

"Those are the folks who are less able to fight off this virus," Whitley said. "We want them to stay home until we see this through."