

Carl Blackstone 0:00

Good afternoon. This is Carl Blackstone with the Columbia Chamber. We're thrilled that you're on today with us. We're delighted to have Steve Benjamin, the mayor of Columbia, joining us. We've got over 125 folks dialed in and sometimes with that many folks on a conference call it gets kind of loud. So, Steve, if you're okay with this, if folks have questions for you virtually, they can log in to the website and type their question and if you are listening on a phone call you can email info@columbiachamber.com and we will get them to the mayor or one of his staffers to get your questions answered. We're also going to be joined here with Lou Kennedy with Nephron Pharmaceuticals for quick update. So, when she jumps on, we'll let her have a few minutes as well. Steve unprecedented times.

Mayor Benjamin 1:20

That's an understatement. Yeah, definitely unprecedented times.

Carl Blackstone 1:39

Thanks for joining us. Before we get to Steve, Lou. Lou is president of Nephron Pharmaceuticals and you all have been turning some stuff out. Can you give a quick update on what you're doing?

Lou Kennedy 1:52

Yes, so that the folks on the call know, Nephron manufacturers, and has done so for 22 years, respiratory nebulizer solutions. They're not the products that are known as inhalers that come in a small canister, we make the solutions that go into a little machine called a nebulizer that creates a mist, which opens the patient's airway so that you can get oxygen into your lungs and prevent bronchospasm and so forth. Our business is shooting through the roof as hospitals are stocking up everywhere, and so we consider all nephron employees essential, everyone showing up. We're cleaning our common areas the same way that we clean our clean rooms. So, we're basically bathing all these areas in hydrogen peroxide fog. We are also producing hand sanitizer. We've delivered it to the first hospital and certainly to all the Nephron employees. We're doing that as we speak. And I've just been over to product development team over for scaling up production of hand sanitizer. We are adding more and more of the components necessary to do that. We want to make that available to the hospitals and the rest of Colombia as Colombia needs help with hand sanitizer, we're doing the best we can to produce as much as we can, as quickly as we can. The FDA gave us approval last week as a registered 503b, sterile compounder to make it for America. And that's what we're going to do. But we, we wanted everybody to know that these respiratory meds are made by only two companies in the country and we're both located in Columbia, South Carolina. We're all working hard to do the best he can to provide what is needed for the treatment of the severe respiratory illness, as well as provide as much hand sanitizer as we can pump out.

Carl Blackstone 3:52

That's good stuff, Lou. And you're looking for folks too, correct?

Lou Kennedy 3:57

That's correct. We've been continually hiring through all of this. We started a new training class just yesterday with 22 or 23 folks. We are looking for chemists, microbiologists, and we've been looking for part time to help. As many of you know, we have 860 educators and our educator program was started last March. And they are showing up in record numbers to help us during this, particularly a big spike in demand and we couldn't do it without them. And it's been really great. We're also checking temperatures at the door. So take a little longer for folks in the door changed, but we're checking temperatures and making sure that we're keeping our workforce as healthy as we can.

Carl Blackstone 4:46

Great, Lou, thanks for all you're doing. We really appreciate it. It's an impressive operation you got so thanks for responding.

Lou Kennedy 4:56

Happy to be a member of the Chamber and we're happy to help and I applaud Mayor Benjamin for all this, the city has done to support what we need in the area, as well as the Chamber and thank you for allowing me to be a part of this.

Carl Blackstone 5:13

Great, thank you. Steve, you and I have gone through a few storms and floods together, but this is kind of remarkable. So, while we have Chamber partners on the line I'd love if you don't mind briefing us on your thoughts in the response that the city has made. Y'all have been on the front lines of this, so if you don't mind, just give us an update, that'd be great.

Mayor Benjamin 5:42

Sure, Carl. We tried to get ahead of the of the issue as best we could. The last week of February sent out a notice asking for us to pull together a Midlands Coronavirus Task Force. We go you to participate in that with all of our regional stakeholders from Fort Jackson, the university and other colleges, state government, hospitals, and it was a great meeting to start the discussion about what we could begin doing as a regional group of leaders. You know, we sit at the center of a \$43 billion dollar GDP economy when we started this thing, and we need to figure out how best to get arms around this public health crisis. Because obviously, we knew that it would emerge not just into a public health practice, but obviously it's an economic crisis that we're all doing right now. The numbers as we as we all know, you know, a daunting America, right? Right now, in South Carolina, I guess today we'll cross the threshold of 300 cases. Everything I've seen in terms of epidemiological projections as it relates to an epidemic or pandemic like this, we'll see those numbers begin to double every several days. And as a result, we're seeing some unprecedented impacts on our economy. The socialistic thing is changing the way in which we live in which we operate. Some of us are becoming

much more efficient at what we do, but in a consumer-based economy, like America has, it has really brought our economy to a screeching halt, we're expecting an obviously impending recession, where we significant of seeing numbers as high as maybe a 25% drop in GDP. Really, unless something unless something happens no end in sight, if we can't get our arms around a public health crisis, will we ever be able to get our arms around the economic crisis? And obviously, hearing more and more comments even from the President and others as to whether or not these measures are enough or important enough, I should say, for the economic concessions that we're making, right now. I'll be happy to maybe in questions and answer to share my own my own position as well. I will tell you, more importantly, what we're trying to do here in Colombia, we met as a council leading by example, we met over Zoom, second such meeting, and we'll continue to do so trying to model that you can still get the people's work done, while also engaging in social distancing. But we've decided to move forward on Friday passing and we call our resilient Colombia. It's our first swipe at the economic sustainability plan. Design is trying to keep things moving and continuity of government plan, but also a partnership with our businesses and our critical nonprofit organizations that allow us to show our sister governments that you can act, even in these tough times, but also get the job done. While social distancing Resilient Columbia calls for a \$6 million dollar investment. Half of that goes straight to public safety organizations. We are asking our frontline folks, our police, fire, EMS 911, and even some of our public works officials who have to keep working as they are the defining characteristic of what it means to be a developed nation. They have to keep working to make sure they're providing for each and every one of us. They got to have the equipment that they need to keep themselves safe so they can go home to their families at the end of the day. So, \$3 million of that is gone directly to our public safety and frontline workers. We've set aside a million dollars, and what some of you are familiar with the loan loss reserve fund, in which we're engaging with - some of the bankers on the line may have already been in touch with our city staff and our Office of Business Opportunities. If you have not, you most likely will, in which we set up a million dollars as a as a loss reserve per loan. We're only giving loans to small businesses up to \$25,000. But we're putting city's money up at risk first, so that hopefully we could we can stimulate, we can use that as leverage, to leverage a larger amount of funds available to small businesses as they all seek to aggressively reduce their overhead but also continue as well. Allow them to stay open. Particularly a lot of our hospitality businesses are staying some challenges for this is for all businesses. So, we've established his million-dollar reserve fund. And we've also set aside another million dollars intended for forgivable loans for profit businesses as well as nonprofit businesses. Targeted is nonprofit organizations that provide critical infrastructure We've set aside, for example, separately apart from the half million \$250,000 for senior resources that conducts the Meals on Wheels program. We have a whole lot of seniors here who are food insecure, don't know where the next meal is coming from. So, we decided that at 2000, then we would make sure that they had meals over the next eight weeks, five days a week that's being provided for. On the other side, on the small business side this is just meant to be available to those businesses under 100 employees, including full time employees and part time employees. If it's not already then by tomorrow, we're expecting this to be up and running. But it's meant to be a small business stabilization package to help address businesses that are affected by the Covid-19. crisis is meant is meant the gap funding as we work through some of the programs coming through the SBA and whatever resources may be coming through the state as well. We're trying to do our very best to see how we can fit in into these gaps to try and help people stay open. And the goal around some of these programs like I mentioned, senior resources, as an example, is really trying to we are part of an interdependent and interconnected global economy. We are a microcosm of society. We are connected some of these are businesses that can connected to folks all across

the country, and indeed all across the world. But for a period of time, we want to make sure that you're able to sustain those relationships, while at the very same time, focusing as much as possible on creating an inward economy that focuses on the Midlands, and how we can support businesses here in the Midlands. We're making these funds available to small businesses because not only can they stay open and provide the services to their customers, as many have for years, been able to keep some of their employees on staff who are going to take care of their families able to pay their rent to the landlord. We will realize that ad valorem taxes when you pay for these public services will take a hit next year. We want to make sure that our landlords are healthy and strong. In this in fact, we can we can also do all these things while providing for the food security needs. Some of our most challenged population, then things begin to work themselves out. But this will be a journey here y'all. Some people are hoping a couple of weeks. I doubt seriously, I think it's going to be several months and we have to continue to be nimble. We need your ideas, as many ideas as possible. This was the first swing of the bat. We hope to have several swings over the next several months.

Carl Blackstone 14:22

Steve, while you're on that. This has been changing so rapidly, the news and the different restrictions have moved so swiftly. Talk about, if you don't mind, I know the governor issued yesterday no more than three congregating. I think the city has put in curfew at night. Can you just explain that process that people are familiar with why y'all took that measure?

Mayor Benjamin 14:52

Yeah, well, I'm sure some of you are probably tired of hearing the term "flatten the curve" but for those of you who have not, and those of you that might hear again, our goal is to make sure that - there's a finite number of hospital beds here in the Midlands. There's a finite number of ICU beds. There's a finite number of respirators and equipment that we will need to keep people alive when it reaches a critical stage of their lives. We've got to make sure that we slow down the spread of this virus. The virus will continue to spread, we're seeing some precipitous numbers nationally is as the virus climbs in South Carolina again, it's very much like the rest of the case. I think we saw, Carl, the first we saw the first 100,000 cases come out afterwards to 67 days I believe. The second 100,000 cases came out to 11 days. And the third 100,000 cases came in four days. Our goal is to make sure we slow down the spread of this virus enough so that are limited capacity of our healthcare system is not overwhelmed so that people cannot receive services. The only way we could do that, according to every public health official whose opinion I value, is to engaged in active social distancing. We saw some major challenges even as the governor and the president and others were working to spread the word about social distancing, as they gravitated towards that position, that some of our younger people in particular, were not taking it seriously. I was 29 once and 25 I was invincible then. We saw a number of folks planning house parties and different parties that we knew would lead to the aggressive spread of the virus. So, we decided that at that a curfew that obviously has significant exceptions for those seeking medical help those going to and from work or working. And obviously, the first-time public safety responders are exempt from the curfew. So, your employees are not inhibited, obviously going to home from work and working through the curfew. We thought we needed to have more tools in our toolbox to try and boost policy and practice in force more social distancing. The governor, as I

understand, I've watched his press conference yesterday, when the governor issued a state of emergency, there's a provision that does give law enforcement the ability to disperse crowds of three or more. I don't believe executive order required that. I think the original emergency order actually enabled law enforcement - so he wanted to highlight that yesterday. So that's what I understand the governor's movement. We're going to we're going to keep doing everything we can to model the importance of social distancing. But as you all see in the news every day, some of our citizens just don't get it.

Carl Blackstone 18:00

But and I totally agree with that. But listening to council last week, I mean, y'all were early believers in limiting capacity in restaurants. Y'all did everything you could to keep businesses open with what you were initially trying to do, and you still are with all the things you are doing. And I don't want - the governor, in his order, was not looking at shutting business down at all. He was looking at social gatherings.

Mayor Benjamin 18:31

I know, I know that. I have my disagreements with the governor on issues of import, I do know that he's aggressively doing his best to balance the needs of the economy and to balance the needs of our school system. It can't be easy, but I feel very strongly that we're going to have to clamp down for a while to slow the spread of this virus and exactly how it's done, obviously we have 50 states going about it 50 different ways. We're going to have to determine, at very least for the sphere of influence that we operate in here in the Midlands, how we're going to play our role. And that's probably trying to do that the center of this economy.

Carl Blackstone 19:19

Yeah, quick question. I've we got a question from John Hopman. "Where can we have volunteer opportunities to strengthen the manufacturing base expand critical capabilities?" So, I guess folks that are looking to pivot their normal business operations to provide critical needs. I think we could probably get with it. I know the State Chamber is working on some things there. But we lack some rules regarding essential business being open and classified that way don't we Steve?

Mayor Benjamin 20:07

Yeah, I'm not sure I understand the question. If he's speaking about maybe what Lou Kennedy was just talking about. There are certainly opportunities to do good and do well right now. If you have the ability to retool your operations to help. The pressing need that we know is out there, I would urge you to do so you know, within the confines of your ability. I'd also say that there are a bunch of new rules that come into play once the state of emergency has been declared around procurement. So, if you know of services that that your state government, federal government, your local government might be able to avail ourselves to make ourselves better and much more efficient and also maybe help meet some pressing public needs, those all very much welcome. But if you have a unique ability through your company

to help us meet some of the pressing public health needs of the day, those ideas are most welcome. Everyone's reaching out and looking for the very best ideas right now.

Carl Blackstone 21:22

For those that are looking to retool feel free to reach out to us at the Chamber and I'll be happy to help any way I can to get you in to the right folks. Steve, the growing cases now - I think, Richland County is second behind Kershaw county in the number of cases. Have you seen any data where is it impacting any one group? Have you seen any areas - are what should we be doing differently to curtail that in Colombia?

Mayor Benjamin 21:58

Yeah, well, as of yesterday, we saw 298 cases. And for some of us, again, who operate under the fiction that this is just for old people - it's not just old people. We've seen infants actually come down with the virus as well. Obviously, the mortality rate and the probability of having some underlying illnesses is greater if you tend to be older. I think we should expect those cases to continue to climb certainly. Naturally as we test Carl, we're going to start seeing as - as testing expands, I should say both through DHEC but also through our hospitals and others who also now testing as well, who were not able to do so at the front end of this. We're going to see those numbers grow and we're going to see them grow fairly precipitously, I believe. Hopefully they begin the show maybe at a lower rate of infection. These For the those who are tested, and then certainly the mortality rate begins to - hopefully doesn't climb the way it did in some other countries, as well. But as a country right now, you know, we've not yet peaked, and we will soon become in terms of just the number of people, not populations, because there's a population of number of people who are infected with the virus. We're going to need a really, really advanced aggressive national response. We have been engaged and I would encourage you all, as each of you have great relationships through the Columbia Chamber with our congressional delegation. There are a number of different ideas, some good and some bad on both sides of the aisle in both chambers as a how we to address this. No one has a corner on good ideas. But I think to be very - As matter of fact, when Lou was speaking earlier, I had to switch over very quickly. Congressman Clyburn's Chief of Staff called me back on an issue that we raised them that was important to Columbia, on regarding direct appropriations coming to local governments of a certain size across the country. Some of the wording in the House Bill would not allow that funding to come directly to any city or county in the state. And, obviously, we are moving forward fairly aggressively to try and meet some needs there. So, it was important to us that our voice be heard, but I would encourage you to be actively involved with your legislators about advancing positions that are important to your companies, as well as to your community. They need to hear from you right now. Doing nothing is not an option.

Carl Blackstone 25:06

I totally agree with that. I have a couple of quick questions. Steve Baggett says does the small - going back to what the city passed on Friday. Does the small business stabilization package include sole proprietors that may be impacted by the virus?

Mayor Benjamin 25:31

It does. It does.

Carl Blackstone 25:34

Great. Second, Sarah Marin says, “When will the grant program for nonprofits be made available? How can nonprofits apply?”

Mayor Benjamin 25:46

The goal is, I want to say counsel, we may be meeting as soon as tomorrow. Well, of course we passed it on Friday when I say that we cranked this out all the way up until the beginning of the council meeting. And we asked that to have something for us by today for counsel to vote on by tomorrow. So, as soon as I would say tomorrow or Thursday at the latest. The process will, will be clear. And just as they were saying, our tendency at all levels of government, this will be a process that will be a lot faster. Because you know, time is of the essence right now, and I goal to cut through the red tape is a is real and a priority for everyone. So, let's say Thursday at the latest. I'd encourage you all if you don't visit the City of Columbia website regularly to do so at columbiasc.gov. All the rules will be laid out there on the website.

Carl Blackstone 26:58

A follow up question there from Kimberly. Mayor will other nonprofits be eligible for funding? For Able SC we're seeing that people with disabilities and older adults are at disproportionate risk during this crisis. We are filling enormous gaps left by other service providers and are needing immediate assistance for our citizens with disabilities.

Mayor Benjamin 27:20

Sure, no, thank you. Kimberly, I received your email and Tameka replied to it, as well. Those gaps that make this for some of our disabled citizens that oftentimes in our number conversations, don't rise to the top of the awareness of some of our public policies. Please, I would strongly encourage Able SC to apply. This nonprofit stabilization package is meant to target supplies for our most vulnerable populations including our seniors, high risk and underserved communities. So please put something before us and respond post haste once the rules come out.

Carl Blackstone 28:09

Great. Mayor Jason with Home Team Barbecue has a question. “Are there any discussions revolving a refund of property tax?”

Mayor Benjamin 28:19

Yeah, I spoke to Aaron. I think Aaron may have been the first the second person at Home Team that I called a secret. I literally call business people and nonprofit executives almost all day every day, trying to source the very best ideas. I've advanced that idea. Obviously, as many of you know, I know Carl gets tired of me talking about it. The portion of the property tax bill that's paid by our folks every year as the portion that comes to the city of smaller and lower, we only get about 16 cents to the dollar on a property tax bill. We have intentionally not raised taxes over the last 10 years, not one dime, we've actually cut city tax millage by 12. Mills. The vast majority of the tax bill goes to school district and the rest about 23, 24% goes to the county. I haven't advanced that idea, because we've got to figure out how obviously, we continue to provide the services to the public that the public needs, but at the very same time, as the property tax relief as maybe in a very immediate way that helps stimulate the cash flow that our businesses has. I'll tell you, I've been discussing it with our CFO as recently as this morning. So, we're trying to figure out how to make sure we have general fund reserves to continue to meet the needs of the city of our residents, but the very same time looking at some relief. We are looking at these now, not just in property taxes, but in hospitality taxes and parking revenue, we're going to do everything we can do that might ease the burden on our business community and our citizens. We're going to look at it. We've been good stewards of those funds the last 10 years and we will continue to do so. I will tell you that property taxes are at the top of my list of considerations if in fact, we show that we can continue providing services that citizens need over this period of time.

Carl Blackstone 30:36

Great, that was a great question. Mr. Ron Harvey has a question for you, "Mayor outside of public health needs, what are some of the other top needs or services that you are seeing that we can focus on to help our community?"

Mayor Benjamin 30:54

Public health is obviously the number one need encouraging everyone to do our respective fair shares. I think us as business leaders, this is going to be an opportunity for some of us to really rethink our operations and think about obviously telecommuting in a way, if it is indeed possible and fits your business model. And I say that because I do get constant emails and messages from employees who do not believe they are essential employees and feel that they should not come into work and want me to advocate on their behalf. And certainly, I would say, let's all look inward at our existing operations and figure out ways in which it can be more efficient. I will say that I've been so encouraged the employers that I speak to, and I'd say the vast majority 95% of them, the primary concern, their primary concern has been for their employees. This has been the kind of most encouraging recurring theme that I hear. But I think first, let's make sure that we're all looking inward at our own operations and thinking about how best we can we can influence the public health by inculcating social distancing norms in our organization. That would be number one and then Ron, people like, you know, engagement regularly who are very creative, I would think you're going to see so many different opportunities to do something better as the world changes around us. We're talking about seismic tectonic shifts in our economy right now. So I think if you see those ideas, share

them with us. You know, we do have the power of the pen the power of policymaking that might help us address some emerging need, maybe before the merges or certainly be able to give them the front side of it. We need your ideas right now we need really good ideas, particularly those that help some of our business folks on this call, get to the other side, which again, you know, is as yet undefined. I still believe we're talking about months and not weeks, guys, regrettably, but if you see good ideas, we need to hear them. And obviously, Carl can source questions but for those of you who may not already have it, my email is Stephen.Benjamin@columbiasc.gov.

Carl Blackstone 33:42

Great, thank you. We'll put that on the web. And the way, a recording of this will be made for those that couldn't get in. We had a few people that didn't register early and were locked out due to the space restraints. I've got one more question. Sharon's got a question. I'm not sure if we can answer but we'll help you get the right answer, Sharon. "Working at hospital services we provide the local hospitals and many clinics with linen scrubs, etc. Our employees are essential to the community and have been stopped by local police. Without hospital badges, what can we provide a traffic stops to allow us to keep running smoothly?" That's a legit question, Sharon. I don't know if Steve, you've got a response to that but we can we can certainly check with Columbia police on that.

Mayor Benjamin 35:15

Get us a very specific information and that challenge. That's something that we can socialize pretty quickly with the police department. They're going to continue doing their job and enforcing the curfew. If you have a friend who's been slighted in a job, please let us know that Chief Holbrook and Chief Kelly, they've done a really good job making sure that the police department has the tools and also the discretion and the judgment that they need to make smart calls, but people go on with particularly commerce like that that's critical to the to the public health. So, they are obviously going to continue enforcing the curfew as they've been ordered to do from 61 days or so. But that's a hurdle we can cross and what somebody we can we can easily institutionalize that process if I know the specific challenge there.

Carl Blackstone 36:12

Yeah. Well, Mr. Mayor, you've been very generous with your time. I really appreciate it. And thanks for keeping us safe. Y'all really had been proactive on this thing. So, thank you and Council for all your work.

Mayor Benjamin 36:23

Well, I'm available when you need me, Carl. For those of you who don't know, Carl and I, we speak at least maybe every other day, every other day, so we say in close touch. If you need me, y'all, we're here. We're praying. We're working. We need you just as much as you need us right now. So, send us your ideas and let us all lead by example. And God bless y'all.

Carl Blackstone 36:51

Great, listen, thanks again. Again, for those that are listening. We appreciate you logging in and check this out. We will have a recording of this on our website so ColumbiaChamber.com and we'll be having more of these as we deal with this coronavirus. But y'all please practice your social distancing. Wash your hands. Be careful. Thank you, Steve. We really appreciate you.