

Floor Speech – House Bill 63

Rep. John Lawrence

Mr. Speaker, for months, County Health Departments in the Southeastern suburbs have been leading the COVID response effort, from testing to vaccines. These Counties have been planning for a mass vaccination event like the COVID pandemic for years. They have locations lined up, providers lined up, appointments lined up, volunteers lined up. Everything is ready to go. But for some reason, the state Department of Health wants to ignore all of this and reinvent the wheel from their offices in Harrisburg. Instead of using the county resources in place, the state has proposed two sites for the Collar Counties around Philadelphia in the four county area – an area with a population of 2.5 million people – a fifth of the state’s population.

And this newly invented state plan is short on details. We don’t know when these sites will be operational, how appointments will be made, who will be eligible, and if any of the people who have been patiently waiting for months on the County Health Department’s waiting list. This seat-of-the-pants approach reminds me of trying to build an airplane while flying it.

Mr. Speaker, the state’s mass vaccination plan for the Southeast has come together in the last five days. The counties have been planning for this exact mass vaccination scenario for FIVE DECADES.

Mr. Speaker, we do not have time to waste. As vaccine supplies increase in the weeks ahead, we need to use resources to get shots in arms, not reinventing the wheel. Our county health departments and county commissioners know the area, know how to do this, and are ready to act.

I’d like to read excerpts from a Press Release issued last Thursday. It was issued jointly by the County Commissioners in Montgomery, Chester, and Bucks Counties, along with the Delaware County Council. It’s not often

that four counties put out a joint press release like this, and it is very germane to the debate today.

SOUTHEAST PENNSYLVANIA COUNTIES ISSUE JOINT STATEMENT ON REGIONAL VACCINE SITE

"We are extremely disappointed to hear that the Pennsylvania Department of Health is not considering our request to allocate the Johnson and Johnson vaccine directly to Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties. We have reiterated our concerns about establishing a regional PEMA (or state run mass vaccination) site for many reasons, and we remain deeply concerned that equitable distribution will be compromised at such a site.

"Instead of working with local elected officials and county Health Departments closest to the people we serve, the State has chosen to take the advice of a Boston logistics company to establish regional sites as our local mass vaccination sites sit underutilized. We have highly qualified public health and safety teams in place, high-volume locations secured, and more than 500,000 people waiting on our collective lists to get their shots. We just need more supply.

"Opening a separate state-run vaccination location raises many important questions that our residents deserve to know the answers to, such as will they have to pre-register on yet another list to receive the vaccine at these new regional vaccine sites or if their current places in line will be kept. We also have questions on how will the state ensure equitable access for these regional sites including options for telephone registration and language access. These questions remain to be answered. The last thing we want is to see our constituents have to sign up for yet another list when they have already been waiting for weeks.

"For all these reasons, **we implore** the Pennsylvania Department of Health to allocate [vaccines] to [our] counties directly."

Mr. Speaker, the legislation in front of us today will solve this issue. It stops the finger pointing, stops the bickering, stops the pontificating press conferences, and gets shots into arms. This bill gets shots from the State directly into the hands of the Chester County Health Department, which has tens of thousands of people waiting for shots. The Health department has locations lined up, volunteers lined up, everything is ready to go. This bill greatly increases the number of medical professionals who can vaccinate during the pandemic. This bill puts accountability and transparency measures into place so the people of this state know how shots are being distributed and administered. I strongly encourage support for my proposal HB 63, before the House today.