

Indoor climbing facilities push for reopening, citing COVID data

By Tyler Shuey, *Bainbridge Island Review*

Dec. 29, 2020 – The owner of a climbing facility in Bainbridge Island is pushing the governor to reopen them statewide or “it will take years for indoor climbing to come back.”

Michele Lang, Owner of Insight Climbing & Movement, which also has a site in Bremerton, is the spokesperson for the Indoor Climbing Coalition.

That organization recently sent a letter to Gov. Jay Inslee requesting him to allow these facilities to reopen by the new year, citing state Department of Health data that shows there have been no known COVID-19 cases from such facilities.

“While most businesses are now allowed to stay open in Washington state, indoor climbing facilities have not been allowed to operate even at lower capacities,” Lang said. “These are all small businesses, and we cannot pivot to take our services outdoors. If our members can’t reopen for the new year, which is our busiest season, this industry will fail, jobs will be permanently lost...”

A coalition news release says indoor climbing is a sport with tall walls creating extreme social distancing (up to 50 feet), the use of chalk on hands that deactivates 99% of COVID contact, and it is a non-cardio activity that can be done 100% masked. Climbing gyms are also comprised of local memberships and utilize reservations and check-in and out procedures, which allows for up to the minute contact tracing.

“We care deeply about the health of our communities and what we are asking for does not minimize the seriousness of the pandemic, nor does it put our communities at a greater risk,” Lang said. “We understand why our industry was initially closed, but if we cannot reopen for the new year indoor climbing in Washington state will soon collapse.”

Recently, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo reopened gyms because they “are now one of the lowest known drivers of (COVID) clusters” accounting for 0.06% of outbreaks.

Indoor climbing is a \$30 million industry made up of small businesses that support 1,000 employees and approximately 200,000 Washington state customers but has been operating at a near-complete loss for eight months.

“There are only a few industries in the state which have been fully shut down, and with no meaningful aid from the state being provided and our livelihoods, investments and savings disappearing despite the evidence that we can operate safely, we are running out of time,” Lang said.

“Regardless of when we reopen, we are asking the governor to allow climbing gyms to be separated from the “Fitness” designation in the same way swimming pools did earlier this year and be allowed to reopen in a limited capacity.”

The coalition has sent an Indoor Recreation Climbing Guide Proposal signed by the owners of 23 climbing facilities from around the state to Inslee.