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26TH DISTRICT, NEW YORK

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May 22, 2020

The Honorable Chad Wolf
Acting Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
500 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20536

The Honorable Bill Blair
Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness
House of Commons
Ottawa, Canada K1A 0A6

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf and Minister Blair,

I write to you regarding the extension of travel restrictions along the northern border between Canada and the United States.

The bi-national agreement between the United States and Canada placed necessary restrictions on non-essential travel across the border in response to the threat of the highly infectious novel coronavirus. In early March, our neighboring nations were grappling with how to best stem the spread of COVID-19 domestically, but it soon became evident that travel across international borders was increasingly risky to public health. Border communities, like mine, value the economic and cultural impacts of sharing an international border, however, we understood the necessity of implementing reasonable travel restrictions amid a global pandemic.

The interconnectedness of Western New York and Southern Ontario is supported and grown by the ease of travel and trade across the border. I commend both governments for negotiating an agreement that attempts to diminish the economic harm felt by these communities by continuing to allow commercial traffic, while also addressing the public health crisis by including an exemption for the travel of essential health care workers. Other forms of essential travel included employment, study at an educational institution, travel for immediate health care needs, and official government, diplomatic or military travel. As our countries begin instituting phased re-openings that reduce restrictions on non-essential and recreational activities, I ask that each administration consider how this translates into daily life for residents in border communities.

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On May 19th, the United States and Canada extended non-essential travel restrictions for an additional 30 days, while the State of New York and the Province of Ontario have begun to reopen parts of their economies. I write today to advocate that in the course of this extension, the definition of essential travel be expanded specifically to include 1) travel safely to visit family, 2) travel to manage individuals' legitimate business interests, and 3) travel to inspect, secure and/or manage personal property. Protecting public health is the utmost priority, so we must begin to carefully plan for border restrictions to be relaxed in a measured and balanced way to permit legitimate travel. This approach should not be "one size fits all" and should maximize safety to the public health. We should recognize, though, that the restrictive border is an anomaly, since many residents in both New York and Ontario use the border on a daily basis for basic tasks central to their livelihood.

This global pandemic requires us to work hand in hand to create a process that protects public health while reinvigorating commerce. Cooperation and trust among governments at all levels is vital, including those between neighboring countries. It is my hope that our governments, appreciating the meaningful connections my constituents have with Southern Ontario, will incorporate these considerations under further modifications to previously announced cross-border travel restrictions.

Sincerely,



Brian Higgins
Member of Congress