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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 6, 2020

TO: Local Governments in Washington

FROM: The Attorney General's Office

SUBJECT: **Legality of Options for Supporting Small Businesses and Low-Income Individuals During a Public Health Crisis**

I. INTRODUCTION

Washington State and the nation are in the midst of a public health and economic crisis related to COVID-19. The Governor recently ordered all non-essential businesses generally to cease operations. The Governor also ordered all people in Washington State to stay home, with limited exceptions. In the midst of this unprecedented crisis, our office has heard from many local governments looking for ways to help the residents and businesses in their communities.

Several local governments have contacted our office to seek guidance about their aid efforts. Our office recently published general guidance that constitutional restrictions on use of public funds should not be an impediment to local efforts to combat COVID-19, as local government expenditures made in furtherance of the effort to combat the virus further fundamental public purposes, such as protecting public health and welfare.

This memorandum follows up on that general guidance by evaluating two potential initiatives some are considering to assist low-income residents and small businesses affected by the crisis. The first initiative would provide cash assistance to low-income individuals who lost their jobs due to COVID-19, or who are struggling financially as a result. The second initiative would provide grants or loans to small businesses struggling to survive the closure of their businesses. The stated goal of the initiatives is to ensure compliance with public health guidelines and to prevent economic hardship in the region.

We conclude that cash grants can be provided to low-income individuals consistent with our state constitution's restriction on gifts of public funds. We also conclude that grants or loans can likely be provided to impacted small businesses, so long as reasonable safeguards are in place to prevent fraud or abuse.

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II. ISSUES

1. Under article VIII, section 7 of the state constitution, may a local government provide cash assistance to low-income individuals who have lost their jobs or are struggling financially due to COVID-19?
2. Under article VIII, section 7 of the state constitution, may a local government provide grants or loans to small businesses struggling with the State-ordered closure of their businesses?

III. SHORT ANSWERS

1. Yes. Article VIII, section 7 of the state constitution allows local governments to give money to provide necessary support for the “poor.” Temporary cash assistance to low-income individuals who have lost their jobs or are struggling financially would fit in this category. More broadly, when government carries out its fundamental purposes with public funds, it does not violate article VIII, section 7. Preserving public health and promoting public welfare are fundamental purposes of government. Temporary financial assistance for low-income residents during a public health crisis advances public welfare, so a court would likely not consider it to be an unconstitutional gift.
2. Probably, with sufficient safeguards in place. Given the unprecedented health crisis that Washington faces, loans or grants are likely permissible if a local government can establish a clear nexus between such programs and either protecting the local economy or promoting compliance with public health guidelines.

IV. FACTUAL BACKGROUND

A. The Governor Ordered People to Stay Home and Non-Essential Businesses to Close to Limit the Spread of COVID-19

Washington State faces an unprecedented public health and economic crisis related to COVID-19. On January 21, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Washington State Department of Health announced the first case of COVID-19 in the State. *See* 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (COVID-19), <https://www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/Coronavirus> (last visited April 6, 2020). Since then, the virus has spread rapidly throughout the State. As of April 4, 2020, the State Department of Health has documented 7,984 cases and 338 deaths. *Id.*

The Governor has acted to limit the spread of COVID-19. Most relevant here, on March 23, 2020, the Governor issued the Stay Home – Stay Healthy Proclamation 20-25. *See* Proclamation

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by the Governor Amending Proclamation 20-05. The proclamation described the virus's impact on public health and the economy: "the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and its progression in Washington State continues to threaten the life and health of our people as well as the economy of Washington State, and remains a public disaster affecting life, health, property or the public peace." *Id.* at 1. The proclamation also described the challenges faced by the state's health care system: "models predict that many hospitals in Washington State will reach capacity or become overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients within the next several weeks unless we substantially slow down the spread of COVID-19 throughout the state." *Id.*

To slow the spread of COVID-19, the Governor ordered people to stop leaving their homes, with limited exceptions, and he ordered non-essential businesses to close:

All people in Washington State shall immediately cease leaving their home or place of residence except: (1) to conduct or participate in essential activities, and/or (2) for employment in essential business services. This prohibition shall remain in effect until midnight on April 6, 2020, unless extended beyond that date.

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Effective midnight on March 25, 2020, all non-essential businesses in Washington State shall cease operations except for performing basic minimum operations. All essential businesses are encouraged to remain open and maintain operations, but must establish and implement social distancing and sanitation measures established by the United States Department of Labor or the Washington State Department of Health Guidelines. This prohibition shall remain in effect until midnight on April 8, 2020, unless extended beyond that date.

Proclamation by the Governor Amending Proclamation 20-05 at 3, 4. The Governor has since extended all provisions in this order through May 4, 2020. Proclamation by the Governor Amending Proclamations 20-05 and 20-25 at 2.

COVID-19 is also causing devastating economic effects in Washington and nationwide. During the two weeks from March 15 to March 28, Washingtonians filed 310,937 new claims for unemployment benefits. <https://www.esd.wa.gov/newsroom/news-releases?ReleaseYear=All> (last visited April 6, 2020). Across the nation, workers filed nearly ten million initial unemployment claims from March 15 to March 28. See <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf> (last visited April 6, 2020) Many small businesses in Washington have already announced plans to close permanently.

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B. State and Local Governments Are Looking for Ways to Combat the COVID-19 Pandemic

In recent weeks, our office has received a number of inquiries related to steps state agencies and local governments can take to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences. Our office recently published general guidance on these inquiries. *See* Guidance on Analyzing Issues Related to Gifts of Public Funds During the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 17, 2020), available at http://mrsc.org/getmedia/37fa7cc7-fb7f-4dc4-88d4-4ad6a8887318/w3agcorona_gopf.pdf.aspx. This memo analyzes two specific ideas some local governments are considering to further ameliorate the effects of the crisis: (i) providing cash assistance to low-income individuals who have become unemployed or are otherwise struggling financially due to COVID-19, and (ii) providing government grants to small businesses that are struggling with government-ordered shut downs.

V. ANALYSIS

A. Background Principles Related to Gifts of Public Funds Under Washington’s Constitution

Before addressing the specific policies at issue, this memorandum briefly summarizes the constitutional limits on local governments’ ability to give or loan money to individuals or companies. Article VIII, section 7 of the state constitution reads:

No county, city, town or other municipal corporation shall hereafter give any money, or property, or loan its money, or credit to or in aid of any individual, association, company or corporation, except for the necessary support of the poor and infirm, or become directly or indirectly the owner of any stock in or bonds of any association, company or corporation.¹

Const. art. VIII, § 7.

¹ The state constitution places similar limits on the State’s use of its “credit.” *See* Const. art. VIII, § 5. “The credit of the state shall not, in any manner be given or loaned to, or in aid of, any individual, association, company or corporation.” *Id.* Because the present inquiry is from a local government, article VIII, section 7 applies, although courts interpret the two provisions “identically.” *See Citizens for Clean Air v. City of Spokane*, 114 Wn.2d 20, 39 n. 8, 785 P.2d 447 (1990).

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Our Supreme Court has recognized that when the constitutional convention adopted article VIII, section 5, the related provision that limits the state's lending of credit, it did not intend to hinder state government from carrying out its "essential function to secure the health and welfare of the state's citizens." *See Wash. State Hous. Fin. Comm'n v. O'Brien*, 100 Wn.2d 491, 495, 671 P.2d 247 (1983). The purpose of article VIII, sections 5 and 7 is "to prevent state funds from being used to benefit private interests where the public interest is not primarily served." *Wash. Pub. Ports Ass'n v. Dep't of Revenue*, 148 Wn.2d 637, 653, 62 P.3d 462 (2003) (quoting *Japan Line, Ltd. v. McCaffree*, 88 Wn.2d 93, 98, 558 P.2d 211 (1977)). A government's use of public funds is presumed constitutional, and the burden of overcoming that presumption lies with the individual making the challenge. *City of Tacoma v. Taxpayers of Tacoma*, 108 Wn.2d 679, 702, 743 P.2d 793 (1987).

Washington courts "use a two-pronged analysis to determine whether a gift of public funds has occurred." *In re Recall of Burnham*, 194 Wn.2d 68, 77, 448 P.3d 747 (2019). First, the court asks whether the funds were expended "to carry out a fundamental purpose of the government." *Id.* If the answer to that question is yes, the analysis ends, and there is no gift of public funds. *Id.*; *CLEAN v. State*, 130 Wn.2d 782, 797-98, 928 P.2d 1054 (1996). If the answer to that question is no, the court asks whether the funds were given with donative intent, and what the public received in exchange (also called "consideration"). *CLEAN*, 130 Wn.2d at 797-98. The consideration that the public receives is the "key factor." *City of Tacoma*, 108 Wn.2d at 703 (quoting *Adams v. Univ. of Wash.*, 106 Wn.2d 312, 327, 722 P.2d 74 (1986)). Unless there is a proof of donative intent or a grossly inadequate return, courts do not inquire into the adequacy of consideration. *City of Tacoma*, 108 Wn.2d at 703.

State courts have not offered a complete list or definition of what constitutes a "fundamental purpose" of government. However, case law applying article VIII, sections 5 and 7 of the state constitution provides several examples. Fundamental purposes of government include collecting taxes, furthering higher education, acquiring real property, controlling floods, enforcing child support obligations, disposing of solid waste, providing and administering workers' compensation, and obtaining and defending guardians ad litem.² In contrast, building baseball

² *In re Burnham*, 194 Wn.2d at 77 (acquire real property); *Washington Pub. Ports Ass'n*, 148 Wn.2d at 653 (tax collection for use of public property); *Hadley v. Dep't of Labor & Indus.*, 116 Wn.2d 897, 907, 810 P.2d 500 (1991) (administer industrial insurance); *Citizens for Clean Air*, 114 Wn.2d at 39; *Johnson v. Johnson*, 96 Wn.2d 255, 263-64, 634 P.2d 877 (1981) (enforcing child support obligations); *Citizens Protecting Res. v. Yakima Cnty.*, 152 Wn. App. 914, 922, 219 P.3d 730 (2009) (flood control); *West v. Osborne*, 108 Wn. App. 764, 771, 34 P.3d 816 (2001) (obtaining guardians ad litem); *Major Prods. Co. v. Nw. Harvest Products, Inc.*, 96 Wn. App. 405, 410, 979 P.2d 905 (1999) (furthering higher education); *Dep't of Labor and Indus. v. Wendt*, 47 Wn. App. 427, 435, 735 P.2d 1334 (1987) (providing industrial insurance).

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stadiums, constructing parking garages, and allowing a railroad to use tracks rent free are not fundamental purposes of government.³

Entitlement payments are an acceptable means to accomplish a fundamental government purpose. “No unconstitutional gift of public property occurs when funds are expended as entitlement payments, made by the government in carrying out its fundamental purposes.” *City of Tacoma*, 108 Wn.2d at 702. The Court defines “entitlements” as “a form of assistance provided to the public, or a segment of the public, as cash or services, in carrying out a program to further an overriding public purpose or satisfy a moral obligation.” *Id.* at 702 n.15 (quoting *City of Seattle v. State*, 100 Wn.2d 232, 241, 668 P.2d 1266 (1983)). Examples of entitlement payments include payments for day-care services, vaccinations, fare-free bus zones, crime victim compensation, and relocation assistance payments to people or businesses displaced by condemnation. *Id.*

Article VIII, section 7 also allows local governments to give or loan money for the “necessary support of the poor and infirm.” The phrase “poor and infirm” in article VIII, section 7 is read in the disjunctive, meaning the benefitted individual must be “poor” or “infirm,” but does not need to be both. *Wash. Health Care Facilities v. Ray*, 93 Wn.2d 108, 116, 605 P.2d 1260 (1980). State courts generally do not assess who “belongs in the benefitted class” of the “poor and infirm.” *O’Brien*, 100 Wn.2d at 497. Instead, they defer to the legislative determination of what constitutes need, and they assess the reasonableness of that determination. *Id.*

Finally, courts will likely consider a local government’s motive when it gives or loans money, property, or credit to individuals or companies. When analyzing the Legislature’s actions under article VIII, section 5, our Supreme Court has stated that it gives great weight to the government’s stated declaration of purpose. *Id.* at 495–96. The Court does not accept the government’s declaration as conclusive, but it will accept it unless it is arbitrary or unreasonable. *Id.* at 496.

Summarizing these principles, when a local government gives or loans money, property, or credit to an individual or company, the courts are most likely to uphold the local government’s action if one of the following is true: (1) the action is necessary to accomplish a fundamental governmental purpose, (2) the public is receiving something in exchange, (3) the action is necessary to support the poor, or (4) the action is necessary to support the infirm. Additionally, it

³ *CLEAN v. City of Spokane*, 133 Wn.2d 455, 469, 947 P.2d 1169 (1997) (parking garage); *CLEAN*, 130 Wn.2d at 797-98 (baseball stadium); *Peterson v. Dep’t of Revenue*, 9 Wn. App. 2d 220, 228, 443 P.3d 818 (2019), review granted *sub nom. Peterson v. Port of Benton*, 194 Wn.2d 1001, 451 P.3d 326 (2019) (rent free use of railroad tracks).

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is advisable for the local government to state why it is taking the action, explain what it expects to accomplish, and describe the benefit the public will receive.

B. Cash Assistance to Low-Income Individuals Who Have Lost Their Jobs or Are Struggling Financially Due to COVID-19 Comply with Washington’s Constitutional Limitations on Gifts of Public Funds

Local governments do not violate Washington’s constitutional prohibition on gifts of public funds by providing cash assistance to low-income individuals who have lost their jobs or are struggling financially because of the COVID-19 crisis. This is clear for two independent reasons.

First, Washington’s Constitution does not prohibit local governments from expending resources for “the necessary support of the poor.” Const. art. VIII, § 7. If the local government’s program uses reasonable means to assess who is “poor” when providing cash assistance, a court would almost certainly conclude that such assistance is “the necessary support of the poor” and so not barred by article VIII, section 7. The courts have not clearly defined what “poor” means for purposes of article VIII, section 7, but they generally defer to governmental determinations on this point. *O’Brien*, 100 Wn.2d at 497.

Even if financial assistance to low-income individuals affected by the COVID-19 pandemic would not qualify as “the necessary support of the poor,” it would still not be a gift of public funds because it furthers a fundamental purpose of government. State courts have stated that a core purpose of government is ensuring public health and promoting public welfare. *See, e.g., O’Brien*, 100 Wn.2d at 495 (securing the health and welfare of the state’s citizens is an essential government function); *Hudson v. City of Wenatchee*, 94 Wn. App. 990, 995-96, 974 P.2d 342 (1999) (describing “the preservation of the public health” and “promotion of the public welfare” as fundamental purposes of government).

Temporary cash assistance to the jobless can help to promote public welfare by lessening the financial impact caused by sudden job loss and preventing potentially more intractable problems like long-term unemployment, hunger, and homelessness. Our Supreme Court has concluded that cash assistance can accomplish a fundamental purpose of government when it “further[s] an overriding public purpose or satisf[ies] a moral obligation.” *City of Tacoma*, 108 Wn.2d at 702 n.15 (quoting *City of Seattle*, 100 Wn.2d at 241). The overriding public purpose of temporary cash assistance in this context would be to ameliorate the economic hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of non-essential businesses, which left many people

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without work, at least temporarily.⁴ This in turn could help address local governments' concerns about the economic collapse of the region.

C. Grants or Loans to Small Businesses That Are Struggling with Government Shutdowns Can Also Likely Be Provided in a Way that Complies With Washington's Constitution

This question is a closer call than the first one, but we believe there are ways that grants or loans to small businesses affected by the COVID-19 crisis could be provided that would likely comply with Washington's constitutional prohibition on gifts of state funds.

The reason this question is a closer call than the first one is that our state constitution explicitly recognizes the importance of government support for "the poor," but also expresses concern about improper gifts to private businesses. For example, our Supreme Court found a violation of article VIII, section 7 when a county gave money directly to a private corporation for an agricultural fair and maintained "no direct control over how the money was . . . spent." *CLEAN*, 130 Wn.2d at 798 (discussing *Johns v. Wadsworth*, 80 Wash. 352, 355, 141 P. 892 (1914)).

That said, context matters. The context for local governments' proposed programs of small business loans and grants here is not "to enhance the private sector's profit at the taxpayer's expense"—which is clearly impermissible under the state constitution—but to prevent small businesses from having to close permanently due to the hardship associated with government-mandated closure of their businesses. *O'Brien*, 100 Wn.2d at 495. "[T]he health of the state's economy [has] traditionally been [a] concern[] of state government." *Id.* at 496. "The range of remedies available to meet these state problems must necessarily be wide. We leave the wisdom of a chosen remedy in the legislative arena." *Id.*

Local governments' stated purposes for providing grants and loans to small businesses are to prevent the region's economic collapse from the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis and to ensure compliance with public health guidelines. A local government would need to provide a clear nexus between any proposed grants and loans to small businesses and public health and welfare to help explain to a reviewing court why these local efforts accomplish a fundamental government purpose. It seems reasonable to conclude that helping small businesses survive temporary closure will help reduce the economic hardship caused by this crisis and encourage small businesses to comply fully with public health guidelines, but including statements to that effect in authorizing legislation would be helpful. Because there is no case law directly on point,

⁴ This analysis is limited to the context of the COVID-19 crisis. A different analysis might apply if a local government wanted to provide cash assistance at another time.

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this conclusion is somewhat uncertain, but courts would likely recognize the unique circumstances here and the need for strong action.

If the court does not see small business grants and loans as accomplishing a fundamental government purpose, the court would next ask whether the funds were given with donative intent, and what the public received in exchange. *CLEAN*, 130 Wn.2d at 797-98.

A court would analyze the issue of donative intent by asking whether the local government intended to give money to small businesses without receiving anything in return for the public. A gift is a voluntary transfer of property without consideration. *City of Bellevue v. State*, 92 Wn.2d 717, 720, 600 P.2d 1268 (1979). “If intent to give a gift is lacking the elements of a gift are not present, and article 8, section 7 does not apply.” See *CLEAN*, 130 Wn.2d at 798 (quoting *Scott Paper Co. v. City of Anacortes*, 90 Wn.2d 19, 33, 578 P.2d 1292 (1978)). If the court found that the local government intended to receive something in return for the public, it would then ask whether what the public received was “grossly inadequate.” *CLEAN*, 133 Wn.2d at 469.

For the courts to analyze these questions, it would be helpful if local governments identified the specific economic benefits that the public would receive from the grants or loans. Local governments would be wise to ask any small business seeking funds for evidence of public benefit. This could include information like the number of jobs created or saved, the amount of tax revenue created or maintained, whether the business would pay wages or benefits to workers during the government shutdown, whether temporary funding would avoid risks like bankruptcy or permanent closure, or any other relevant information to assess public benefit. If a local government could document benefits to the public along these lines, a court could certainly find that state aid to this circumscribed class of the public (small businesses), in furtherance of legitimate state objectives, provided the necessary “consideration” for the aid. *Id.*