

Washington state's indoor-climbing gyms petition Inslee to be allowed to reopen

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Tod Bloxham is the owner of Edgeworks Climbing and Stone Gardens. He's leading an effort to petition Gov. Jay Inslee to allow indoor rock-climbing gyms to be open during COVID under the argument that they can be sanitary and operate under distancing conditions. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

By [Gregory Scruggs](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Two bundled-up climbers ascended the 40-foot outdoor wall at Stone Gardens climbing gym in Ballard on Monday night. They were among the few people scaling a climbing wall in Washington during this week's brief dry spell since indoor-climbing gyms were shuttered on Nov. 16 [under public-health restrictions](#) imposed by Gov. Jay Inslee to combat the third COVID-19 wave.

On Wednesday, [Inslee extended the statewide closure of gyms, fitness centers, indoor dining rooms and movie theaters to at least Jan. 11.](#)

Indoor-climbing gym owners facing financial ruin are growing increasingly anxious that a [data-driven proposal to reopen at 25-50% capacity](#) that they presented on Nov. 18 has received no firm answer from Inslee's office. On Dec. 28, the recently formed Washington Indoor Climbing Coalition publicly called on the governor's office to allow the state's 18 indoor-climbing gyms to reopen by Jan. 1, the beginning of their three-month busiest season.

"I am frustrated and concerned that the governor's office is not using data that is now available from state health departments to help guide their decisions and [recognize the] nuances of climbing gyms being a safer option than initially realized," said Tod

Bloxham, a member of the coalition who owns Edgeworks in Tacoma and purchased Stone Gardens in October when its previous owner sold due to business losses from public health restrictions.



Tod Bloxham, sitting, is the owner of Edgeworks Climbing and Stone Gardens. He's gone from 150 employees to 30 with his indoor climbing gym's being closed. Standing behind in the Ballard Stone Gardens gym are employees Keath Suchy, left, Keller Morrison and Christian Horton. (Steve Ringman /The Seattle Times)

The coalition's proposal points to contact tracing data from state health departments in Colorado, Michigan, Oregon, Washington and Washington, D.C., that indicates no COVID-19 outbreaks were tied to indoor-climbing gyms. Gym owners argue that climbers can easily mask because the sport is not cardiovascular exercise and that top rope climbing is a physically distant activity from one's climbing partner, while bouldering is a solo activity. They cite data that climbing chalk is 99% effective at killing COVID-19 on surfaces and they point to climbing gyms' tall ceilings as buildings conducive to adequate ventilation. Due to these factors, they request that climbing gyms be regulated differently from other fitness facilities.

“[Indoor-climbing facilities] are essentially as close to being outdoors as one can be while still indoors,” wrote University of Washington medical professor and Harborview Medical Center director Dr. John Lynch in a letter supporting the coalition's proposal.

While indoor-climbing gyms operated from July to November, that brief window has barely kept gym owners afloat in what was a growth industry before the pandemic. Three gyms opened across the state this year and five more were set to open in 2020 or early 2021, with those plans now on ice, according to Bloxham. He has canceled a planned Stone Gardens expansion to Tukwila and says that Riverstone Climbing Gym in Mount Vernon has gone out of business. (Messages left for Riverstone Climbing Gym seeking comment were not immediately returned.)

Michele Lang, who owns Insight Climbing and Movement on Bainbridge Island, [expanded to Bremerton last year](#). She invested \$1.3 million in the purchase and build-out, then delayed her March opening to July. Since the gym opened this year,

it was ineligible for federal aid calculated on 2019 tax returns. She has received \$23,250 in state and local grants, \$49,000 in a forgivable PPP loan, and \$277,000 in a federal Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) that must be repaid. Fitness facilities are not singled out for support in the new congressional relief package.

“I am supporting two locations, two sets of staff, two utility bills and two rent/mortgage payments on the aid for one,” said Lang, who owes more than \$1.4 million in personally guaranteed debt on her two gyms. “The EIDL loan is new debt — that’s like running up a giant credit card bill.”

As the debt mounts, Lang hopes the coalition’s public-health data will persuade state officials to allow indoor-climbing gyms to reopen for their peak season. “It’s terrifying to be told we can’t operate when we know there is data supporting our ability to operate the same way it would support other nonessential businesses being open,” she said. “We have not received anything showing or telling us why our industry has to be shut down.”

Bloxham said he was in regular conversation with Jon Snyder, Inslee’s policy adviser on outdoor recreation and economic development, who requested data to make the case for reopening indoor-climbing gyms. The coalition collected that data, but communication with Snyder has gone silent since early December. Snyder was on vacation this week and did not return a request for comment.

“It’s possible there could be positive developments on these restrictions over the next week,” Inslee’s spokesperson Mike Faulk said on Tuesday. “The science of the virus and how it spreads makes any indoor activity worth re-evaluating during a third wave of COVID that threatens to be the worst yet if we aren’t careful. We want to and believe we can return to these activities, it’s just a matter of deciding the best way forward in the pandemic era. Indoor climbing will be back.”

Seattle’s Vertical World became the [country’s first climbing gym](#) when it opened in 1987. The niche sport has since grown exponentially and will make its Olympic debut next year. [Two climbers who competed in Olympic qualifiers train at Vertical World.](#)

Washington’s climbing gyms create 1,000 jobs and serve 200,000 customers statewide, but the industry’s future remains uncertain amid extended shutdowns.

“We are sitting here treading water and quickly losing that battle as we are running out of money,” Lang said.

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