

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: Forest Service officials have announced that parts of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area will open for overnight trips on Thursday for the first time since the entire wilderness was closed two weeks ago. The partial reopening impacts nearly 40% of the BWCA, mostly near the Gunflint Trail. For the city of Ely, many of the entry points near them are still closed. Joining me now is the Mayor of Ely, Heidi Omerza. Thank you for taking the time today, Mayor.

HEIDI OMERZA: Thank you for having me. I truly appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. We want to be checking in, seeing how everybody's doing. We know Ely has been majorly impacted by these fires. The Camp Fire, which is the closest there to you all in Ely, we're hearing today is that about 46% contained. Have you heard any word on when entry points near Ely may reopen?

HEIDI OMERZA: We haven't gotten any official word. We're pushing hard for them to make a decision. Obviously, we're keeping safety in mind. However, it's that balance between safety and economics. We don't want our outfitters and our tourists to go out into the Boundary Waters and not be safe. But we also all understand that there's an inherent risk anytime you go into a wilderness area. We can never guarantee 100% safety, as all of us know up here. So it's that balance. It's always that balance up here.

NINA MOINI: It is a balance. And we've been watching these roundtables with folks from many different walks of life, many different stakeholders, county officials, state officials, business owners, tourism officials with the state law enforcement. What are your days looking like right now as mayor? What kinds of updates are you getting?

HEIDI OMERZA: I tend to listen to our own city's emergency management personnel. I feel like they're able to balance all the voices at the table because they know Ely best. And although I am sitting there, they can disseminate the information and really give me a clear understanding of what's going on, just because this is such a great event, and it can get to be a bit much. But I truly appreciate our fire management team that we have here in Ely. And the fact that this is not the first time we've been through this.

We've had other blowdowns. We've had other fires. And so I appreciate that we do have very smart people sitting around our table. And I truly appreciate everyone that is here and that cares about Ely. And they said from the beginning, this isn't a sprint. This is a marathon. We're going to be here for a while. And I appreciate the patience of everybody from start to finish. Everybody so far has been very understanding of everything that we're going through. So I appreciate their understanding too.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, July has now come and gone, a really big month for tourism and for your businesses there. What are you hearing now from business owners as we roll into August here? I'm sure there are a mixture of emotions, but I'm sure that frustration is building.

HEIDI OMERZA: Well, we just missed our big weekend. We were supposed to have our blueberry arts festival. I was very impressed with Ely and our surrounding communities. We did a pivot, I guess is the right word. There was a bad storm that weekend up here, but instead of having blueberry arts, some other communities, and some other vendors, we did this little circle of other communities to have a blueberry esque type feel. And this is our bread and butter right now. This is when everybody should be coming to our area to enjoy the great outdoors. So we're encouraging people to still come up.

I keep saying Ely is open for business. We can't quite experience the Boundary Waters, but you can still come to Ely and experience the outdoors. And that's the message we really are trying to get out. So people still come to Ely, but businesses-- down. That is the reality. And we're trying to capture those numbers and really get that message out there that we're not going to rely on others for a special session. That's what we would prefer. But that's not in my hands. That's not in the city of Ely's hands, but to really try to look for other ways to somehow capture that and to really relay that to our representative, Skraba, and our Senator Hochschild. And they have been here, up here a lot and listening and encouraging everyone to make sure we're capturing those numbers.

I've heard anywhere from some businesses being down 30% to some businesses being down 70%, and that is outrageously disheartening. And so in my mind, I am encouraging people to shop for Christmas right now. I am encouraging people to go online and support. I know the United Way has set up a special fund for us that has Ely on there. So that's what I am trying to do-- is get the word out on those things.

NINA MOINI: Tell us a little more, Mayor, about what people can do in Ely if they are not able to get into the wilderness area, they're not able to go camping there and canoeing there. You mentioned the blueberry festival and making pivots where you can. What are some of the other ways that folks can enjoy Ely?

HEIDI OMERZA: So we have a great museum, the Dorothy Molter Museum. We have a bear center. We have a wolf center. We have some other great museums. You can see we have a lot of trails that you can walk, you can bike, you can ATV. We have a beautiful trailhead building. And then we also have a lot of great state parks that you can camp in that still have reservations that are available. So they're are not in Ely. They're close to Ely though.

NINA MOINI: But you're saying there's still a variety of ways that people can come there and spend time and enjoy time. We Governor Tim Walz was in Ely yesterday. As you know, he's considering a special session right now to address some of the economic recovery for really that whole region due to these wildfires. You mentioned that that's something that you would like. What would you like to see come out of a special session? I think sometimes it's hard for people to understand how lawmakers meeting. It's like, how long does it take for that to turn into something tangible, for these businesses and money in the hands of business owners so they can keep going? What are you hoping comes out of a special session?

HEIDI OMERZA: Well, if I had a magic wand, I'd want everybody to be made whole, like the event never happened. I misplaced my magic wand. So that won't happen. And knowing the political landscape, I know I'm very leery if that's going to happen or not. I want it to happen. I want businesses to have faith in what could happen. And I would like all the businesses that are right now in Ely, I want them to be able to stay viable and continue on and to be able to be open for business next year. That's what I want to happen.

I don't know how. I don't know the ins and outs. That's why I'm a mayor and not a state representative or state senator. But I will do whatever they ask of me. So that's where my role is, is to make sure that our economic development authority can get those numbers and do whatever they need to do. But we are here to help, and we're here to make sure that those things happen. And if we need to go to every business in town and get those numbers, we definitely will do that or get whatever they need us to do, because we will definitely do whatever we need to do to facilitate whatever needs to happen.

NINA MOINI: And that those numbers you're talking about, losses and needs will drastically continue to change as you get further into the month of August. And I wonder if you've been thinking about what needs there in Ely if these BWCA entry points near the city remain closed longer term, because that's what officials say. They have to do for safety.

HEIDI OMERZA: Right. Exactly. And we will continue to have the roundtable discussions. We'll continue to have people way smarter than I am to try to get better ideas from them and see if we have more outside-of-the-box thinkers, because that's what I've been most amazed about, is just trying to get the smartest people in the room to continue to get together and have ideas and move forward on those ideas, because I truly appreciate how willingness people are to come forward and share ideas and continue to figure it out, and balancing that safety and the patience and moving forward.

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

HEIDI OMERZA: It's amazing how we are all coming together under this just tragic event, this horrible event that we are going through right now.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, it's going to be long road.

HEIDI OMERZA: I appreciate that about Ely.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. It's going to be a long road. We all have a sense for how strong the community there is. And just before we let you get back to work, Mayor, what are some of the fall events that might be coming up that folks can be planning ahead for to come and enjoy Ely, September, October? What are those months like for all of you?

HEIDI OMERZA: Well, there's nothing like a fallen, and we do have something called the Harvest Moon, which is a lot like the blueberry festival, but it's the weekend after Labor Day. It's on a smaller scale, so that's probably why I like it much better than blueberry arts, because it's usually not as busy, I hesitate to say that, but because I've been telling everybody to come up for that. It's in our Park. It's right downtown. So that is probably one of my more favorite events. So that's our big event that we have coming up. That's the main one. We also have Heritage Days coming up. That's in mid-August. I'm going to say the wrong date because I can't think of it right now. I want to say it's August 14, but I could be wrong. So those are two big things that are coming up in Ely right now.

NINA MOINI: So if people still want to plan a trip this fall and if they want to support, there's plenty of time to do that and to make a difference.

HEIDI OMERZA: Right.

NINA MOINI: Mayor Omerza, thank you so much.

HEIDI OMERZA: Yes.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. Thank you for your time.

HEIDI OMERZA: Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. Take care. That's Ely Mayor Heidi Omerza.