

# The Detroit News

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## Editorial: End Whitmer's prohibition on office work

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Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is still clinging to her unilateral power, even as the threat of the virus is subsiding. The governor's desire to control how businesses return to the office is yet another example of her unreasonable refusal to ease restrictions that have been in place for most of the last year.

Business groups, including the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, have a message for Whitmer and her administration: Give them more say over how they run their businesses.

They are requesting state health and regulatory agencies allow employers more autonomy in making these decisions about when and how their employees come back to an office setting.

Currently, state emergency orders say that if work can be done remotely, businesses should allow employees to do so. The rule, enforced by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration, states: "The employer shall create a policy prohibiting in-person work for employees to the extent that their work activities can feasibly be completed remotely."

The current edict is in place until April 14, but officials have made it clear it could get extended even further — likely another six months, although adjustments could be possible.

That's too long and too uncertain for the state's employers, especially small business owners who have struggled the most during the pandemic.

Whitmer said she'd review the order, after the Reopen Michigan Safely business coalition formed this month and began advocating for flexibility in returning to office work as long as safety guidelines were followed.

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The governor hasn't offered any concrete plans, but she did announce yet another group to recommend a blueprint for getting workers back in person.

The Michigan chamber is concerned, however, about the lack of small business representation on this "Return-to-Office Workgroup." The group is scheduled to meet for the first time Thursday.

Wendy Block, the Michigan chamber's vice president of business advocacy and member engagement, points to the makeup of the workgroup, and its omission of any small businesses representation. Its members comprise eight state and local governments officials, four union leaders and four representatives from large corporations.

Yet small businesses employ half the private workforce in Michigan. That's a large voice to ignore.

Block says Michigan's continued workplace restrictions are some of the strictest in the country, and it's hampering innovation and collaboration — and preventing a full economic comeback. The prohibition on office work has also harmed city centers around the state, as workers stay home instead of head downtown every day.

Heavy-handed rules and regulations hit small businesses the hardest, as they often don't have compliance departments and other resources larger corporations do.

The state needs to back off its invasive approach and give Michigan employers the freedom and flexibility to do what's best for their businesses and employees.