

The Detroit News

■ FOR SUBSCRIBERS

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Opinion: A year later, it's time for Michigan to reopen, return to work

Rich Studley

Published 10:59 p.m. ET Mar. 9, 2021

Recently a billboard was erected proclaiming that Indiana had named Gov. Gretchen Whitmer the “2020 Indiana Business Person of the Year.” While that isn’t true, it is true that neighboring states are open for business and Michigan families are facing a dire situation.

We’ve all heard stories of friends and family making a run across the border into Ohio and Indiana for lunch or a sporting event because of this situation. While that may be great for those living in the border counties, the rest of Michigan, restricted by the state’s numerous emergency orders, has nowhere to run for lunch or a job.

While we fully understand the hazards posed by COVID-19 and the tragic loss of life it has caused, we’ve also had a year to learn how to function with it in our midst. Thankfully, cases have dropped substantially over the last few months. And, COVID vaccines are effective, being distributed widely and becoming rapidly available across the state.

That’s why the Reopen Michigan Safely coalition of the state and local chambers of commerce from around our state believe it is time for Whitmer to take additional steps to get our economy moving again.

Michigan needs a clear plan of action based on data and science to safely reopen offices, increase capacity in restaurants, stores and entertainment facilities, and return employees to in-person work.

The clock is ticking. On Wednesday, it will be one year that Whitmer declared a temporary state of emergency. About one month from now, on April 14, Whitmer’s current ban on in-person office work expires. However, she can automatically extend the office ban for another six months, without input from the Legislature or the public.

That is why the Reopen Michigan Safely coalition strongly encourages you to reach out to Whitmer’s office today and let her know that our job creators and employees should be entrusted to work together to put safety protocols in place in ways that allow our businesses and jobs to come back and survive into the future.

Innovation rarely takes place during a time of severe government control, but instead when citizens are free to use the information at hand to develop creative solutions.

However, Michigan has one of the severest restrictions on in-person work in the United States, even as the overwhelming majority of states are trusting employers and employees who have been armed with safety protocols to make the best decisions for their particular circumstances.

Surveys have shown that significant numbers of employers and employees are eager to return to offices, safely, to increase teamwork, collaboration and innovation and reduce the negative effects of mental stress and isolation people are experiencing while working from home full time.

The damaging effects of the office ban go even further. Closed offices mean that workers do not shop or eat lunch in our commercial areas. Downtown business districts are struggling. Small business are not just closing temporarily, in many instances they are gone for good. This is also affecting local governments as decreased economic activity hits their budgets hard, putting increased pressure on their ability to provide key services such as public safety.

Restaurants, retailers, entertainment facilities, offices and other businesses with capacity or in-person restrictions should be given the option to more fully reopen with proper safety protocols in place. Others states have plans to reopen their businesses and economy. Michigan should, too.

We are encouraged that Whitmer recently acknowledged our initiative and said she will consider an undetermined change to the ban on in-person work. However, our jobs, downtowns and cities are hanging in the balance each day that goes by without a plan. We strongly

encourage the governor to trust job creators and allow them to work with employees to craft plans that allow them to reopen and survive, as soon as possible.

Visit our website at reopenmichigansafely.com to find out how you can support our efforts.

Rich Studley is president and CEO of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce.