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Spotlight PA
Employees at Pa.'s 'life-sustaining' businesses question if their work is worth the risk

Gov. Tom Wolf has no plans to move forward with a broad reopening of businesses during the COVID-19 emergency. His spokesman said he will veto the GOP-backed Senate Bill 613, which the General Assembly sent to his desk on Wednesday. The governor plans to continue his aggressive measures to stem the spread of the virus. "As the administration as stated many times, irresponsibly going against the direction of the Secretary of Health and reopening businesses too early will only extend the length of the economic hardships created by the pandemic," said Wolf's press secretary Lyndsay Kensinger.

The bill would have required the governor to develop a plan using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and federal Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency guidelines in determining which businesses can be open during the coronavirus emergency disaster. Wolf has ordered the closure of all businesses that aren't what his administration terms "life sustaining. Republican senators who favored the bill argued it would provide transparency and clarity in determining which businesses can be open and require them to operate in a safe manner. They said Wolf's list of life-sustaining businesses and accompanying waiver process was confusing, chaotic and showed favoritism.

But Democratic senators who opposed the bill said health experts, including state Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine, called for a guarded approach to reopening the economy when the virus has slowed and the health care system has the capacity to avoid diluting the governor's mitigation efforts. "While the governor and I are as eager as anyone to begin getting people back to work, doing so prematurely will only increase the spread of the virus, further lengthening associated economic challenges, while also placing more lives at risk," Levine wrote in a letter to the senators.

Wolf has remained firm about his need for Pennsylvanians to remain home to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The state remains under a stay-at-home order until April 30. He has also closed schools for the rest of the academic year.

State Republican Party Chairman Lawrence Tabas on Wednesday night issued a statement urging Wolf to sign Senate Bill 613. Tabas also

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Pennsylvania legislators shelter themselves from pandemic hit

Harrisburg Patriot-News
Pa. remains key battleground but COVID-19 radically changes 2020 election

Allentown Morning Call
No handshakes, door-knocking or debates have Pennsylvania candidates finding new ways to campaign

The Hill
Historic shifts seen in support for mail-in voting

implored the governor to sign Senate Bill 327, which would authorize county officials to decide when businesses in their county would reopen. The Senate passed that measure and and sent it to the House for concurrence on an amendment. "Hardworking Pennsylvanians have participated faithfully, and they deserve to see the light at the end of the tunnel," Tabas stated. "Governor Wolf has an obligation and an opportunity to live up to his promise of a transparent government by signing this legislation without hesitation."

Wolf indicated during the COVID-19 update on Wednesday that he did not support the measure to give counties approval to reopen businesses on their own. Neither the House nor the Senate passed the bill with enough votes to override a gubernatorial veto, which requires a two-thirds vote in each chamber. The House passed the bill by a 107-95 vote on Tuesday, with all Democrats and Montgomery County Republican Reps. Todd Stephens and Tom Murt opposing it. The Senate passed the measure by a 29-2 vote, with all the dissenting votes coming from Democratic senators. – ***Harrisburg Patriot-News***

Going to a Pennsylvania supermarket, home improvement center, pharmacy or other business that remains open during the pandemic? Be prepared to wear a mask. That goes for workers, too. Many commercial buildings that serve the public will be required to make sure customers wear masks — and deny entry to anyone who refuses without a medically valid reason — under an order signed Wednesday by the state health secretary.

Employees will have to wear face coverings, too, including those who work in warehouses, manufacturing facilities and other places that remain in business but aren't open to the public. The mask mandate was included in a wide-ranging order that will govern many aspects of how a business operates — from how it arranges its break room to how many patrons it can allow inside at any one time — as the administration of Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf confronts a pandemic that has killed at least 647 in Pennsylvania and sickened thousands more.

Wolf said the latest order is meant to protect supermarket cashiers, power plant operators and other critical workers who can't stay home and are at heightened risk of contracting the new coronavirus. "Our essential workers have stepped up to the plate and are keeping us safe, healthy, fed and sheltered during this time, and we all need to thank them (by) doing everything we can to prevent ourselves from spreading the virus to them," he said at a video news conference.

Wolf is ratcheting up pressure on retailers, warehouses and other establishments to enforce social distancing guidelines and minimize the virus's spread just as majority Republicans in the state Legislature seek to ease his administration's shutdown of businesses it doesn't consider "life sustaining." Wolf previously closed schools and nonessential businesses and ordered people to stay home.

Cases: Pennsylvania health officials reported 63 new deaths of people with COVID-19, raising the statewide toll to 647. More than 1,100 additional people tested positive for the coronavirus, for a new statewide total of nearly 26,500, according to the Department of Health. The state released new information Wednesday on the pandemic's frightful toll on nursing homes and other long-term care facilities: More than 3,000 people in nearly 300 facilities have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and 324 have died — half the state's total death count. For most people, the virus causes mild or moderate

symptoms that clear up in a couple of weeks. Older adults and people with existing health problems are at higher risk of more severe illness, including pneumonia, or death.

State tax relief: The Wolf administration said it's easing up on tax enforcement during the pandemic.

The Department of Revenue said it will pause payments on existing payment plans on request; offer flexible terms for new payment plans; suspend or reduce automatic enforcement of liens, wage garnishments and use of private collection agencies; and take other steps to offer relief to individual and business taxpayers. The measures will last through at least July 15, the agency said Wednesday. The Department of Revenue previously extended the deadline for taxpayers to file their 2019 Pennsylvania personal income tax returns from April 15 to July 15. – ***Associated Press***

If ever there was a time and need for foregoing business as usual in Harrisburg, surely this is it. Yet, even in the midst of a deadly pandemic, there are signs our political leaders are up to their same old tricks. When Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf, for example, joined other northeastern governors to work on plans for reopening the region, the very first reaction from our state Republican leaders was exactly what we've come to expect.

GOP Senate Majority Leader Jake Corman issued a statement saying decisions about restarting the state's economy "will rest with the legislature of Pennsylvania and not with liberal governors from other states." GOP House Speaker Mike Turzai took to Twitter: "Gov. Wolf is entering into a deal with other governors that doesn't take into account the needs and concerns of Pennsylvania citizens."

Wait. You mean the "needs and concerns" our legislature so famously and effectively take into account on an ongoing basis? The ones that earn us national attention? Our unemployment comp system? Our roads and bridges? Our liquor system? Our dismal ratings among all states? And, yes, of course. What possible good could come to our Commonwealth from a multiple-state alliance with on-the-ground leaders in a time of crisis? Why combine health and economic development expertise from New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Connecticut, Vermont and Massachusetts (which, by the way, is run by Republican Gov. Charlie Baker) to deal with the same issues we face?

Better, I suppose to rely on President Trump's "total authority" to reopen states. After all, he's the leader who told the nation Covid-19 would "disappear…like a miracle." But then, that was before he said, "This is a pandemic…I felt it was a pandemic long before it was called a pandemic." But it's not about him.

Wolf was asked about his evil alliance with other governors during one of his too-short telephone press conferences, with too few questions, vague answers and no allowance for follow-up questions. (For one such call, 70 journalists signed up, 15 got to ask one question each. Nice transparency.) Anyway, Wolf essentially said the alliance is one thing, dealing with the legislature is another: "There's nothing there that's antithetical to the executive branch and the legislative branch working together."

Aha. And there's the key. Working together. The best and only way to get through bad times. So, everybody wants to loosen public restrictions, open up businesses, start the trek towards whatever sort of "normal" life now awaits us. But Republicans argue Wolf's been arbitrary and inconsistent in shutting stuff down and they mean to fix it (they also want to play golf).

Wolf argues whatever he's done seems to be working to contain viral spread. And he says you can't have a healthy economy if you don't have a safe and healthy public (though he mostly lets Health Secretary Rachel Levine do his talking). Still, legislation is coming his way aimed at redefining "life sustaining" businesses, and intended to reopen, with restrictions, construction, real estate, car dealerships and more.

Surely this can be done, even on a limited basis and/or gradually. Wolf says he'll decide, if and when legislation hits his desk. But when I ask (yes, I actually got through one day), whether he and GOP leaders reached any agreement on what he might sign and what he would not sign, all he says is he and they "acknowledged differences of opinion."

Hey, that's great. So, the process goes forward. With the clear risk lawmakers pass stuff Wolf vetoes. God forbid, in a time such as this, those who represent us would hammer out a compromise before passing anything. But then lawmakers have guaranteed incomes, health-care, pensions, annual raises. And the $360 million a-year legislature is sitting on its own fat reserve fund of $172 million, according to recent reporting by Spotlight PA. In other words, it's Pennsylvania politics as usual. How about, for once, it stops? – **John Baer's column in *Harrisburg Patriot-News***

The widespread imposition of stay-at-home orders has underscored the critical role that access to the internet plays in modern society. Some countries have done a better job than others in deploying high-quality and robust network infrastructure. In Europe, networks have struggled to meet bandwidth demand, leading officials to ask popular services such as Netflix and YouTube to degrade the quality of their streaming video from high definition to standard definition. U.S. networks have faced fewer problems adjusting to the increase in demand.

Public policy explains the different outcomes. The European Union has embraced a heavy-handed regulatory scheme designed to allocate access to the existing network, while the U.S. has emphasized private investment to expand network capacity. As the internet emerged and developed, the work of European regulators was guided by the legal system developed to govern traditional telephone service largely built with taxpayer funds. This approach presumed that significant parts of the phone network were likely to remain monopolies. The European regulatory framework requires sharing the network that already exists and limiting providers' ability to recoup capital invested in expanded capacity.

The U.S. has followed an entirely different strategy. Rather than fold the internet into an outdated legal regime developed for a different era, the American vision concentrates on encouraging telephone and cable companies to compete by investing to increase their bandwidth. The only major deviation from this pattern occurred in 2015, when the Federal Communications Commission adopted a "net neutrality" rule applying legacy telephone regulation to the internet for the first time. The agency returned to its longstanding investment-oriented policy in 2018.

As demand for internet services increases, the European approach looks more ill-conceived than ever. It effectively treats the internet as a static commodity and prioritizes divvying up existing network over investments in improvements or expansions. The U.S. approach, in contrast, imagines a world where consumers gain from being able to enjoy higher-quality internet services. American regulators want providers to have rich enough incentives to make expanding network infrastructure worthwhile. This has allowed the U.S. to meet the growing demand caused by the advent of smartphones, tablets and bandwidth-intensive applications such as video— and even maintain its networks' resiliency and quality during an unprecedented pandemic.

The U.S. and EU have seen dramatically different investment and utilization. Between 2010 and 2016, American providers invested on average annually 2.35 times as much per household as their European counterparts. This allowed the average U.S. household to consume more than three times as much data as the average European household in 2017, according to Cisco. This is a significant jump over the 44% difference between U.S. and Europe that existed a decade ago. Emphasizing investments in infrastructure allows consumers to realize more of the benefits that the internet can provide. This difference in regulatory approach appears to have played a key role in establishing the U.S. advantage over Europe when it comes to network size and quality.

Reports suggest the U.S. enjoyed a distinct upswing in infrastructure investment following the 2018 repeal of the net-neutrality order. And European experiments with light-touch regulation have resulted in investment boosts. In 2009, for example, Spanish regulators exempted new high-speed networks from the rules governing traditional networks. What followed was an industrywide upsurge in investment in fiber-to-the-home internet. The subsequent reimposition of regulatory obligations on Spanish fiber cables brought these investment plans to an abrupt halt. Network investment has allowed the U.S. to enjoy greater usage levels and higher capital spending than Europe over the past decade.

This was a strong endorsement of U.S. policy even before the novel coronavirus rearranged patterns of bandwidth consumption around the world. That U.S. producers have responded to the recent surge in demand without having to throttle high-quality applications provides the most eloquent demonstration of the wisdom of that approach.
– ***Wall Street Journa*l (The author, Christopher Yoo, is a law professor and founding director of the Center for Competition, Technology and Innovation at the University of Pennsylvania)**

Stay safe

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