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Harrisburg Patriot-News
Pa. House fails to override Gov. Wolf's veto of bill that would've allowed more businesses to operate

Philadelphia Daily News
A 'slice of America' Bucks County district should be a battleground. But Democrats need 'a perfect storm' to win.

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review
Gov. Wolf talking with sports leagues, says it could take until vaccine for Pennsylvania to reach 'normal'

Philadelphia Inquirer
Philly voters have requested more mail ballots than all of Pennsylvania did in 2016

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Editorial: Voting test run – Officials will learn a lot from primary vote by mail

Philadelphia Inquirer

Pennsylvania Democrats have mostly supported Gov. Tom Wolf as Republicans in the state legislature push him to reopen parts of the economy more quickly, and even contemplated revoking his emergency powers. But two months after Wolf ordered most of the state's 12.8 million residents to stay at home and closed all businesses not deemed "life-sustaining," some in his party are starting to show frustration with the coronavirus lockdowns — and with the governor.

The two top Democrats in the legislature wrote a letter to Wolf on Sunday praising his efforts to protect public health — but also encouraging him to consider permitting real estate activity to resume in a limited capacity. He did so this week. On Tuesday, Philadelphia-area Democrats asked Wolf to consider allowing curbside pickup at all retail locations in the state. And a Democratic lawmaker from Montgomery County wrote a letter saying residents in her district "have not yet seen evidence that your administration recognizes and sympathizes with the added physical, emotional, and financial suffering they are facing as a result of our prolonged stay-at-home conditions, which I know you do."

State Sen. Maria Collett, who wrote the letter to Wolf on Tuesday, said Wednesday that the administration has not communicated what steps it is taking to help the Philadelphia region reach the "yellow" phase of Wolf's three-step reopening plan. Most businesses would be permitted to reopen at that point, with restrictions. "We feel like we're alone here," Collett said, describing "a feeling of abandonment" in her communications with the governor's office.

Democrats aren't exactly defecting from the second-term governor, whose handling of the crisis has won broad support in public opinion polls. But a shift is clear. "On the Democratic side, there's been fairly strong support and consensus for the governor's attempts to manage the crisis," said Chris Borick, a pollster at Muhlenberg College in Allentown. "On the edges, there's some frustration and hope for both increased communications efforts to point out that there is struggle and suffering. "It's adding to the pressure on the governor," Borick added. "I don't think it's a surprise. I think it's probably going to, as we move forward into summer, probably even ramp up."

More than a quarter of the state's workforce has filed for unemployment benefits since the crisis started. Collett said programs implemented by the state's Economic Development Department to lessen the pandemic's devastating impact "have failed this area." "It's really disappointing to me," said Collett, who also represents parts of Bucks County. In March, the state launched a \$60 million relief fund for small businesses affected by the pandemic.

Businesses in Bucks and Montgomery Counties have received just 4% of those funds, even though the counties account for 17% of the state's general fund revenues, Collett wrote in her letter to Wolf. "We know here in the Southeast that we are incredible contributors to the economy of the commonwealth," she said in the interview. "To know that contribution isn't matched necessarily proportionally with dollars here to our district to help our businesses, it is beyond devastating."

Lt. Gov. John Fetterman will participate in a Facebook Live chat with Collett to answer questions from her constituents Thursday — an event the senator said was scheduled before she sent her letter. She said she hopes that will "start a new conversation." Wolf's office didn't comment Wednesday.

Other Democrats have been more circumspect. State Sen. Steve Santarsiero (D., Bucks) was among 16 Senate Democrats who signed a letter to Wolf encouraging him to permit non-"life-sustaining" retail businesses to reopen for curbside pickup throughout the state — a step New Jersey announced last week. "On the one hand, we have to make sure we don't risk another spike in the virus," Santarsiero said in an interview. "On the other hand, we have to be aware of the fact that we have real hardship in both... our small businesses as

Op-ed: 7 reforms that would make it easier for everyone to vote in Pennsylvania

CNN Fauci conspicuously stops doing TV interviews as White House moves to reopen economy

well as many families who have taken the brunt of this economically." "The truth of the matter is we do need to start thinking about getting people back to work," he said. "I really think we're getting very close to that point. Curbside pickup is part of that question. I think that would really help get things moving again."

Curbside pickup for retail sales is already available in all counties that have moved from "red" to "yellow" in the [state's color-coded scale of pandemic severity](#). Forty-nine of 67 counties in the state will have yellow status as of Friday. There are no conversations about allowing curb-side pickup in red counties, Wolf said Wednesday. "I understand that both chambers or both caucuses are interested in this," he said on a call with reporters. "Right now we are doing everything we can to balance the needs and desires of people to get back to work, back to shopping, back to life, and the needs to resist this virus."

Santarsiero said Bucks County should be permitted to move to the "yellow" stage no later than June 4, when the [governor's stay-at-home order](#) is set to expire. Local Democratic officials in Bucks and Delaware Counties have suggested the administration's [criteria for reaching the yellow phase were too onerous](#), and Santarsiero said it "probably does need to be reexamined." "The governor knows we have been with him," Santarsiero said of Democrats in the General Assembly. "We have supported what he and [Health Secretary Rachel] Levine have been trying to do, what has resulted in saving lives. I thank him for that. But I think we're at a point now where there are reasonable steps that can be taken which are consistent with those goals."

For their part, Bucks County Republican lawmakers introduced legislation Wednesday to authorize county officials to set their own criteria for reopening businesses. Rep. Frank Farry called the state's plan "arbitrary and illogical." Republicans, who control both houses of the legislature, swiftly seized on the Democratic dissension.

Senate Majority Leader Jake Corman, a Centre County Republican, knocked Wolf Tuesday for vetoing GOP-backed legislation, accusing him of using the legislature "like an unofficial advisory board." State Rep. Marcey Toepel, a Montgomery County Republican, followed Wednesday with a demand on behalf of herself and 13 GOP colleagues in the southeast for Wolf to allow curbside pickup for all retailers, similar to what Democrats in the region were requesting. Toepel said it was unfair that state-run liquor stores are permitting curbside pick-up "when mom-and-pop stores are on the verge of never opening their doors again." – *Philadelphia Inquirer*

In many ways, the coronavirus put a spotlight on inequality. As more Americans under stay-at-home orders rely on the internet for work and services, rural communities are at a disadvantage. The pandemic is forcing Americans to move online for work, school, even doctor visits, but many people don't have the reliable internet service that is required. "School busses are running in Kern County in my district, not to pick up students but to serve as mobile hotspots. That's unacceptable," Representative TJ Cox, D-California, said.

TJ Cox says students and families in his rural California district have been neglected on investment in broadband internet. "Broadband today is last century's electricity. It's absolutely necessary," Cox said. House Democrats included \$5.5 billion for broadband investment in the HEROES Act. While it's unlikely to pass the Senate, despite wide bipartisan support for building broadband infrastructure. "It's extremely important for telemedicine, tele-health and as well as education," Representative Doug LaMalfa, R-California, said.

Republican Doug LaMalfa supports major broadband improvements for his rural Northern California district. He says even new farming techniques rely on internet service. "Production AG, that's where our food comes from. It's important for that to happen, so there's a positive investment for urban people,"

LaMalfa said. "We have a big rural digital opportunity fund coming up," Ajit Pai said.

Ajit Pai, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, says his agency is putting \$20-billion toward connecting millions of rural homes and businesses to high speed internet. "The spectrum is there for wireless carriers to extend their reach," Pai said. Though Pai says the FCC's efforts will be spread out over the next ten years. – **Nexstar Broadcasting**

AT&T says it will stop advertising its wireless network as "5G Evolution" after a division of the Better Business Bureau determined that its language was misleading. The network AT&T branded this way is not, in fact, 5G — a new technology for fast wireless data. While AT&T and other wireless carriers in the U.S. have now begun rolling true 5G wireless networks, AT&T in December 2018 began talking about a "5G Evolution" service that was already available in hundreds of markets, and placed a "5G E" icon on phones when they connected to the network. But it was not 5G. It was merely the existing 4G network with minor speed boosts, at least compared to the fastest type of 5G networks.

Now, a division of the Better Business Bureau that regulates the ad industry has recommended that AT&T stop using "5G Evolution" and "5G Evolution, The First Step to 5G" claims in its marketing. Rival T-Mobile had brought a complaint about AT&T's language. The panel found that this language "will mislead reasonable consumers into believing that AT&T is offering a 5G network."

AT&T said it disagreed with the group's reasoning but will comply with the decision. It's not clear what that means and how much AT&T uses the "5G Evolution" branding today in its stores and ads today. "5G Evolution" is on the company's website, and AT&T phones carry a "5G E" icon when you connect to the 4G network. AT&T spokeswoman Kate MacKinnon declined to comment on how AT&T uses the "5G Evolution" branding today or what would change. AT&T has built out an actual 5G network since then, and says nationwide coverage will be available this summer. But it will be a while before most consumers actually notice, since so far only a handful of new phones are 5G-enabled. – **Associated Press**

It should be no surprise that our state officials' conduct in crises often clanks.

Look where we start from. A sad sack state under normal circumstances. With a horrendous unemployment comp system. A nonsensical monopolistic liquor system. And a vacuous legislature that requires a thesaurus to describe (as in, you just can't find the words). So, it's natural some of our "leaders'" comments and decisions land like a ball-peen hammer on an ungloved thumb.

We might expect a crisis to prompt responses above the norm, but as COVID-19 attacks continue, our officialdom, predictably, falls short of nailing it. There's obfuscation and dismissiveness. And some tone-deafness to how leadership should sound in bad times: empathetic, all-inclusive, respectful.

It feels like decisions are made by a limited group with the same ideology, outlook and life experiences. Like there's no one in the room with a different view; or, in some cases, big-picture common sense. How else do we get Gov. Tom Wolf's nationally-unique system of essential/non-essential business waivers (40,000-plus applied for!) with all its confusion, small business suffering, litigation and now an audit?

Was no one there to point to U.S. Homeland Security guidelines on what's essential in a crisis? No one to say, "Hey, let's use that umbrella instead of trying to build new ones in the middle of a storm?" Wolf has said of the waiver

process, “maybe” mistakes were made. Maybe? “Maybe” the whole thing was a mistake.

How about the state nursing home plan that was supposed to protect the most vulnerable? Spotlight PA reported this month [the plan wasn't put into effect](#), even in part, until after the virus was tearing through nursing homes. Now there are more than 3,100 reported deaths in long-term care facilities, two-thirds of the total state count.

When Health Secretary Rachel Levine - whose elderly mother was moved from a personal care home, reportedly, to a hotel - was asked about the plan, she said, “There was some delay in rolling that out, but it has been rolled out.” Somewhat short of explanatory. And well short of apologetic. (Some might have found it disconcerting to watch Levine, at a recent briefing, speak of her commitment to keeping every Pennsylvanian safe -- while reading from a prepared statement.)

You know about Wolf face-slapping elected officials who opposed his reopening timing. He dismissed them as “cowardly.” But many citizens of all stripes question and balk at Wolf’s schedule. His comment was uncalled for. Disagreeing with those in power isn’t cowardly. Meanwhile, our politics and policy remain divided. The Republican legislature’s busy passing COVID-19-related bills for [Democrat Wolf to veto](#). And some lawmakers wage their own wars, both formally and goofily.

Two Republicans (so far), Lebanon County Rep. Russ Diamond and Franklin County Sen. Doug Mastriano, are calling for [Levine's resignation](#). Butler County GOP Rep. Daryl Metcalfe calls for [Wolf's impeachment](#). House Speaker Mike Turzai -- like another top GOP officeholder we know -- dispenses suspect medical opinion (and Turzai’s married to a pediatrician). Schools should be open, Turzai opines, because healthy kids can’t get COVID-19. “Guess what?” he asked in video on social media, “They’re not at risk unless they have an underlying medical issue.”

Well, guess what? An American Medical Association pediatrics journal reports a study showing children without chronic disease also are at risk to COVID-19. Elsewhere, Lackawanna County Democratic Rep. Marty Flynn took to social media – with capital letters and exclamation points, like another politician we know – to [suggest boycotting businesses of those criticizing Democrats](#). He later apologized. And [York County Republican Mike Jones](#) met with 150 of his closest anti-lockdown pals in Wolf’s home county to say the reopen movement has Wolf “on the ropes” and that, “It’s time to knock him out.”

So, it goes. As things improve, at least for now, in most of the state, it’s alternately annoying and, perhaps for some, oddly comforting to know Pennsylvania remains the place it long has been. – **John Baer’s column in Harrisburg Patriot-News**

Stay safe



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