

PA SENATE MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE TESTIMONY---APRIL 13, 2021

By Robert S. Carl, Jr., Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce, President and CEO

The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce represents 752 members, including businesses and non-profits. Of those 752 members, the Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce represents approximately 140 non-profit members. As such, the Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce is the largest member-based organization in the greater Schuylkill County region and one of the largest chamber representatives of business and non-profits in the Commonwealth of PA. The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce represents members both from within the County but also across county geographical boundaries. The representation of our members is greatly assisted by national connectivity through memberships in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) and at the state level via the PA Chamber of Business and Industry and the Pennsylvania Association of Chamber Professionals (PACP). The power of the information, knowledge, communication, collaboration and partnership through these alliances provides the Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce a powerful advocacy agenda for its members on all critical issues facing its members. COVID-19 is another critical issue.

The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce, since the identification of COVID-19 as a world-wide pandemic has consistently researched critical information, provided updates and suggested guidelines to assist our members manage through the pandemic. Our members have been extremely compliant with all issued guidelines including those from the President of the United States White House Task Force, CDC Guidelines, FEMA, the Governor of the Commonwealth of PA, the PA Secretary of Health and essentially all-important guidelines issued.

The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce has also been a “team” participant on the “Schuylkill County Response, Recovery and Renewal Task Force” established and managed by the Schuylkill County Board of Commissioners with the assistance of their Emergency Management Services. The chamber has been represented in all task force meetings since its inception in early April 2020 and continuing through today. The Task Force has consistently reviewed and managed the pandemic within Schuylkill County and has consistently received reports from our three major healthcare systems regarding their daily status. It should be noted that the county has never been in COVID-19 case management jeopardy in any healthcare perspective and because the county is blessed with three healthcare systems, Lehigh Valley Health Network, Geisinger Health System, and St. Luke’s Health System, the county’s ability to manage the pandemic spans well beyond the three outstanding county hospitals and into their regional tertiary centers within 45 minutes ground travel and 15 minutes life flight travel from Schuylkill County. Healthcare capacity for the public has never been in question in Schuylkill County. Now with vaccination roll-out well underway and with each healthcare system approaching 3,000 vaccinations per week, the inoculation of Schuylkill County is progressing nicely.

Very early on in the pandemic, COVID-19 and the Commonwealth of PA response tilted the playing field for Pennsylvania’s businesses and non-profits beginning with the selection of Essential vs. Non-Essential businesses and the complication of same by not fully understanding

the “supply chain” issues that impact them. There were several national benchmark standards, including from the U.S. Office of Homeland Security and issued by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that would have avoided the pitfalls of the Pennsylvania process. Instead of Essential vs. Non-Essential the better benchmark would have been ability to operate safely and within the national and state safety guidelines issued. Instead, too many businesses were shuttered for too long and the competitive environment that has made the United States and the Commonwealth of PA successful has been unfairly tilted. That unequal playing field while somewhat subsiding, remains solely in the hands of the Governor of PA and his administration with limited, to no, input or communication and input from the PA State Legislature, the local County Commissioners or the local healthcare and business communities and their advocates with important knowledge of how the business community truly operates.

The only benchmark identified by the Governor and the PA Secretary of Health has been 50 cases per 100,000 of population over the last 14 days. Even if that benchmark was not subjective (no true identification of why that is healthcare critical), and was originally accepted to “flatten the curve”, the benchmark quickly became obsolete, due to many additional variables.

Through excellent education and communication to our members and non-members requiring our assistance in the region, the Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce remains confident that our businesses and non-profits are capable and prepared to continue moving forward under CDC and the Governor’s guidelines as they are modified and businesses and nonprofits return to more normal operations.

Artificial restrictions by the Governor and his administration have not “followed the science” and has tilted the economic landscape for certain industry sectors. These include the Hospitality and Tourism industries that are significant in Schuylkill County. Major tourism sites in Schuylkill County include the D.G. Yuengling & Sons Brewery, America’s Oldest Brewery, Pioneer Coal Tunnel and Museum and Fighters’ Heaven, the former World Heavyweight Champion, Muhammad Ali, Training Camp. All have been seriously and adversely affected.

Recently, a forum for Schuylkill County business leaders was hosted by State Representatives Martina White, 170th Legislative District, State Representative Tim Twardzik, 123rd Legislative District and State Representative Joe Kerwin, 125th Legislative District in Pottsville. Two examples highlighted included the restaurant industry and the bus coach transportation industry related to tourism.

Vito Valenti, owner of Vito’s Coal Fired Pizza and Restaurant, Saint Clair, PA spoke about the inequities of the restaurant capacity restrictions compared to “big box” retailers in close proximity to his business including Home Depot, Lowe’s and Walmart to name a few. “I went to these places and there were people everywhere but they were not allowed in my restaurant.” This was particularly frustrating when the “science” and the statistics show COVID-19 community spread at 1.5 percent in restaurants and 70 percent in other family and social setting gatherings.

Jay Newswanger, owner of R&J Transportation highlighted the transportation industry “hit” taken both through school closures and charter excursions which became non-existent, due to

mandated closures. In 2020, there were no school trips and only about 3 percent of their 2019 bus excursions, meaning that about 195 of the 200 tourism excursions scheduled were canceled.

From the beginning of the pandemic to now, the Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce believes in our members and their ability to open and/or operate their businesses, in a safe and calculated manner, following the thorough communication of CDC guidelines and those established by the Governor and the Secretary of Health of Pennsylvania. Our businesses and nonprofits do not want to infect their employees or their customers.

The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce has taken a leadership role in assisting our members and the broader community by issuing a resource of compiled Guidelines for Reopening, which are utilizing all the important information in the Commonwealth of PA “Reopening of PA Guidelines”, assistance from the PA Chamber of Business and Industry, and includes all the best practices as identified by the CDC, FEMA and the best practices established and utilized via our national and state chamber counterparts. The information is detailed and backed by all necessary references for its validity and sourcing.

The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce believes in our 752 members and the greater regional business and non-profit community to follow the necessary guidelines for successful operation. After all, to not follow the guidelines necessary to assure public safety, would essentially be judged very negatively by their customers and clients and would destine them to economic failure. What greater incentive could they have to “do it right the first time”?

There was serious economic damage, via the flawed Essential vs. Non-Essential model, and supply chain misunderstanding affecting even “Essential” businesses. In too many cases, business and non-profit collapse, regression or failures have unfortunately occurred and full economic recovery may not be possible for those who have survived.

The greatest assurance of the pandemic ending is the encouragement of vaccination and broad-based distribution and administration of that vaccine to the public. That process is well underway and the end of the pandemic soon will be at hand. In the meantime, we must manage and balance the necessary public safety guidelines and practices with the essential economic recovery, to preserve our businesses, non-profits and all they gainfully employ and support. It is truly time to get on with it and get back to business.

The Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce places its faith and trust in our 752 members and in their knowledge and application of what they have learned through this pandemic, to best maintain and support their customers and clients.