

Baker: Economic Reopening Will Be Heavily Regulated

Baker, Biz Leaders Mull "Thoughtful Framework"

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BOSTON, APRIL 21, 2020.....Gov. Charlie Baker hinted Tuesday that he plans to convene a group of public health, academic and business leaders to assemble a "thoughtful framework" for how Massachusetts might be able to resume more normal economic and social life once the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.

At the same press conference in which he announced schools will stay closed through the end of the schoolyear, Bajer said he is more focused on the ongoing surge of COVID-19 patients than he is on making a decision about whether to extend restrictions on non-essential businesses beyond May 4. But he started his press conference by saying he wanted to address "what I think is on everybody's mind, which is when does new normal get here?"

"Right now, the commonwealth is still in the surge ... the facts on the ground tell us that we need to stay strong, continue to socially distance and stay home. While we ask for your full cooperation to get this job done, please know that we're working hard to think about a strategy to reopen the economy," Baker said. "We'll have much more to say about this in the days ahead as we pull together the best and brightest minds from our business and public health and academic communities to work together to put together a thoughtful framework that can work in Massachusetts."

For weeks, millions of people across Massachusetts have been working from home, if at all, and companies have struggled to find ways to stay in business and connected to consumers. Some states, like Georgia, have already begun to take steps towards restarting economic and social activity, and President Donald Trump has repeatedly pushed for states to end the economic shutdowns put in place to contain the spread of the virus.

Massachusetts last week joined a partnership of northeast states to develop a regional strategy to reopen the economy, but Baker has repeatedly tamped down talk about how Massachusetts plans to reboot business activity and normal daily activities, saying the surge in COVID-19 infections has his full attention.

"Look, I'm part of the community that would like to see something close to something like a new normal sooner rather than later, but I'm also the person who's looking at all the data everyday and talking to the folks at the command center about what's going on out there," he said Tuesday.

The governor added, "I'll be damned if the way this works is we go through this thing, we flatten the curve, we do all the stuff we're supposed to do, and then we create some run-up again in the fall because we don't handle the re-entry, the reopening, in a way that actually works and makes sense and keeps people safe."

He said all of the business leaders he and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito talk with "aren't looking to jump off the deep end of the pier, they're looking to find a way to do something safely." When it comes to making decisions about lifting non-essential business closures, Baker said the "key elements" will be meeting to-be-determined targets that demonstrate "positive trends when it comes either to testing or to hospitalizations."

Last week, the governor pointed to recent White House guidance that recommended states could begin to resume greater levels of economic activity after documenting 14 days of declining case counts. Tuesday was the fifth straight day that Massachusetts reported fewer new cases than the day before.

"I do think what happens next is going to be more about guidelines and rules and regulations," he said. "The goal going forward here is going to be to establish prerequisites for when we believe it is safe and appropriate to open the doors, and then make rules and regulations and requirements and capacity to monitor around how businesses in Massachusetts can operate safely."

Depending on the timeline for lifting some of the restrictions on businesses, other challenges may crop up. Baker announced Tuesday that schools will remain closed through the end of the schoolyear and that non-emergency child care programs will stay closed until June 29, meaning many children will be home for weeks. For workers with young kids, that could complicate plans to return to their jobs sooner than the end of June.

At the beginning of his press conference Tuesday, Baker got a bit personal and said that he's in the same boat as everyone else who wants to be able to leave their house, visit family members and get back to routines. But he also said the sacrifices being made now are worth it to keep the pandemic from being as deadly as some early projections suggested.

"I think we all want to move on from this, believe me. But I think it's really important for people to understand what's at stake. I can't wait to see my 91-year-old dad again, but I don't want to see him unless the circumstances and the situation and the rules of engagement are right, and that the data, the prerequisites about what's actually going on on the ground here in Massachusetts supports that kind of thing," he said. "Doing it wrong could create more hardship for everyone in the long run and we're going to do everything we can to avoid that."

The governor added, "So, right now, people need to dig deep and stay put." -END-