

Business leader: N.J. 'least affordable, most expensive'

By ERIC AVEDESIAN
Cape May Star and Wave

OCEAN CITY — New Jersey is “the least affordable, most expensive, non-best business climate” in the region, according to Michele Siekerka, president and CEO of the New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA).

Siekerka outlined issues facing the state, including the increase in the minimum wage, in an address March 12 to the Ocean City Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Information from the NJBIA ranked New Jersey last in the region in terms of regional rates — minimum wage rate, top income tax rate, top corporate tax rate, state sales tax rate, property tax rate paid as a percent of personal income and top unemployment tax rate. That gave New Jersey

a 16 in its business climate score. Delaware scored first with a 31 overall regional business climate score, followed by Maryland, with 30. Pennsylvania and New York ranked third and fourth respectively, followed by Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Jersey.

“We see that New Jersey ranks dead last,” Siekerka said, adding New Jersey is getting less affordable and competitive than in recent years. “That means that there’s either a new cost that’s been imposed on business or a new tax that’s been imposed to drive those numbers in the wrong direction. ... We tend to be an extreme outlier and our policies take us in the wrong direction.”

She said New Jersey has many “fiscally challenged and broken” programs that make businesses here unsustainable and are driving

companies to Pennsylvania and New York. According to Siekerka, the NJBIA is lobbying for change to retain companies in the Garden State.

Siekerka said the state increased expenses 45 percent and revenue only 23 percent.

“Don’t get the message wrong. I’m not suggesting that we have a revenue problem with the state of New Jersey. What this calls out is we have a spending problem in the state of New Jersey. We have structurally broken systems that are not sustainable,” Siekerka said.

She said property taxes — how the state funds K-12 education — uses a “wholly broken” funding formula.

While Siekerka noted that New Jersey might be first in delivering “quality delivery of K-12 education,” taxpayers pay on average \$22,000

per pupil per year for 13 years to support education.

She said Massachusetts has equal quality education compared to New Jersey but delivers its education at 23 percent lower cost than New Jersey.

Shifts in the state’s school funding formula created underfunding in some districts, which resulted in higher property taxes to make up for the shortfalls.

“Clearly, this is not sustainable. This should scare the heck out of all of us,” Siekerka said.

In 2019, Gov. Phil Murphy signed legislation raising the state’s minimum wage to rise incrementally to \$15.

The current minimum wage in New Jersey is \$8.85 per hour. Under the new law, the base minimum wage for New Jersey workers increased to \$10 per hour July 1, 2019. By Jan.

1, 2020, the statewide minimum wage increased to \$11 per hour, and then will increase by \$1 per hour every January until it reaches \$15 per hour Jan. 1, 2024.

For seasonal workers and employees at small businesses with five or fewer workers, the base minimum wage will reach \$15 per hour by Jan. 1, 2026. By Jan. 1, 2028, workers in this group will receive the minimum wage inclusive of inflation adjustments that take place from 2024 to 2028, equalizing the minimum wage with the main cohort of New Jersey workers.

Siekerka said the NJBIA lobbied for exemptions for seasonal workers and an “off ramp” to halt the increases in the event of statewide catastrophes.

“Look at coronavirus. Do you really think that you’re going to increase your wages when you’re

laying people off because you might not have work for them?” Siekerka said.

Siekerka said workers under age 18 will be exempted from the pay increase on the schedule.

“No one’s going to be hiring youth for their first job opportunities and wouldn’t that be a shame? What people will do is they’ll hire someone with some minimal skills before they’re going to take a young kid who knows nothing and train them if they’re going to have to pay them \$15 an hour,” Siekerka said.

A bill is pending in the state Legislature to offer a payroll tax credit for businesses hiring youth, she said.

Siekerka urged business owners to reach out to their state representatives and advocate for the passage of this bill before the summer tourist season.

State implements strong measures

Continued from Page A1

time travel.

According to the Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE), as of March 16, 179,073 cases of COVID-19 have been reported worldwide, with 7,074 deaths reported. Worldwide, 78,078 people have recovered from the virus. In the United States, there are 4,138 confirmed cases with 62 deaths.

In New Jersey, 178 people tested positive for COVID-19 and two have died. As of March 16, the positive cases in New Jersey were: Bergen County, 61; Essex County, 20; Hudson County, 19; Middlesex County, 17; Monmouth County, 14; Passaic County, 8; Union County, 8; Mercer County, 6; Morris County, 6; Burlington County, 5; Somerset County, 5; Camden County, 3; Ocean County, 3; and Hunterdon County, 1.

“With all we are seeing in our state — and across our nation and around the world — the time for us to take our strongest, and most direct, actions to date to slow the spread of coronavirus is now,” Murphy said. “I’ve said many times over the past several days that, in our state, we are going to get through this as one New Jersey family. But if we’re all in this together, we must work with our neighboring states to act together. The work against coronavirus isn’t just up to some of us, it’s up to all of us.”

This uniform approach to social distancing is meant to slow the spread of COVID-19.

COVID-19 is responsible for the novel coronavirus pandemic which was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and quickly spread to the Hubei Province and several other countries.

Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, cough, a shortness of breath and

can spread from person to person via respiratory droplets produced when people cough or sneeze.

On March 9, Murphy declared a State of Emergency and a Public Health Emergency to ramp up New Jersey’s efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Executive Order No. 103 declares a State of Emergency and Public Health Emergency across in all of New Jersey’s 21 counties, allowing state agencies and departments to use state resources to assist affected communities responding to and recovering from COVID-19 cases.

The declaration tasks the State Director of Emergency Management and Superintendent of the New Jersey State Police, Col. Patrick Callahan, in conjunction with New Jersey Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli, to oversee the implementation of the State Emergency Operations plan and generally direct the state’s emergency response.

The declaration also triggers other executive powers and safeguards, such as prohibiting excessive price increases pursuant to New Jersey’s Consumer Fraud Act and the ability to waive certain procurement procedures to expedite the delivery of goods and services necessary for coronavirus preparedness and response efforts.

The emergency declaration also empowers all state agencies, specifically the Departments of Banking and Insurance, Health, Human Services, and the Civil Service Commission to take all appropriate steps to address the public health hazard of COVID-19.

In a March 16 press conference, Murphy said that supermarkets and grocery stores, pharmacies, medical offices and gas stations can remain open past 8 p.m. Murphy said all casinos,

racetracks, movie theaters, performing arts centers, nightclubs, gyms, fitness centers and fitness classes will close entirely until such time it is deemed safe for their re-opening.

“Good news is online gaming will continue. Bad news is there’s not much to wager on,” Murphy said.

All other nonessential retail, recreational or entertainment businesses must close at 8 p.m. every night, he said.

Businesses may remain open during their daytime hours but only if they limit their occupancy to no more than 50 people and adhere to social distancing guidelines, Murphy noted.

All bars and restaurants are closed for eat-in services until 8 p.m. After 8 p.m. these establishments may remain open for take-out or delivery orders only.

Murphy said healthy people may be asymptomatic but still carrying coronavirus and putting the lives of others at risk, particularly older people in the community and their families.

“We have got to put an end to this business as usual. To the folks who think this isn’t real, trust me, it’s real,” Murphy said. “To those who think it can’t affect them, I’m here to tell you it can. Just as it is not time to panic, but it is time to be smart, proactive, aggressive as we’re being, it is equally not time for business as usual.”

Murphy said he spoke with both President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence during a video conference with other governors.

Murphy said he discussed with Trump and Pence that New Jersey is one of 12 states that will be standing up testing sites in conjunction with the federal government and specifically the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

“On our call today, I pressed the president and

vice president and their teams for more personal protective equipment for our frontline public health workers for more on the ground assistance and helping FEMA setting up with testing and to prepare to support our businesses, our workers and our economy when we come out of this emergency, which we inevitably will do,” Murphy said.

Persichilli said the extraordinary steps the state is taking by closing schools, colleges, restaurants, gyms and casinos will help stop the spread of the virus. She said counties that are hardest hit have taken more restrictions to limit exposure to COVID-19.

“These aggressive social distancing steps are not trying to scare you. They are intended to stop the further spread of COVID-19,” Persichilli said. “We expect that the spread of the virus can be slowed if we act now and if we act together. Each of us must take personal responsibility by breaking the cycle of this outbreak in our communities.”

Persichilli said residents might be worried about being exposed and a loss of income associated with staying at home and feel isolated.

She recommended checking in with friends and family members via telephone or videoconferencing to stay connected and maintaining structure in a daily routine.

“Although it’s difficult to predict, I suggest that we can expect several more weeks of significant activity and then hopefully things will stabilize if we all take a part in avoiding the spread,” Persichilli said.

Murphy mobilized the National Guard to assist by helping with drive-through virus testing, reopening closed hospitals, and converting buildings for quarantines if necessary.

Adjutant General Jemal J. Beale said the National

Guard will work closely with the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management to assist residents.

“Please know that we are monitoring the current situation and are monitoring best practices implemented nationally by our counterparts in other states,” Beale said. “Our most likely mission sets are focused on capability gaps. They are things like advise and assist, logistics, transportation, traffic control, security or bringing in our engineers to bring a facility back on line that’s needed in some way, shape or form for COVID-19. Wish us luck and please wash your hands on a regular basis and also practice social distancing.”

Murphy said all schools both public and private have been closed statewide.

State Department of Education Commissioner Dr. Lamont Repollet said the aggressive mitigation efforts are made in the best interest of public health.

“In my decades of experience in education I have never seen a challenge as complex and as profound as to which we are facing today,” Repollet said. “An unprecedented challenge requires an unprecedented response.”

Repollet said 90 percent of the state’s schools are closed and are providing remote learning as per preparedness plans.

“These plans will help ensure continuity of instruction, critical services, and food securities,” Repollet said.

All new civil and criminal jury trials in New Jersey have been suspended until further notice, according to an order from New Jersey Superior Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner. The state will continue with on-going jury trials, however.

“While jury trials are a critical component of our justice system, this extraordinary step is necessary to protect the health and

safety of the community. At the same time, we will make every effort to keep our court system running in the face of this health crisis,” Rabner said in a statement.

The Judiciary has been preparing for a potential move to virtual and telephonic proceedings for all non-jury matters.

“It is imperative that we take action to avoid large public gatherings at our court facilities. At the same time, we will leverage our technological capabilities so that other court proceedings can continue with minimal disruption to our justice system,” said Judge Glenn A. Grant, acting administrative director of the courts.

The Judiciary also announced it would suspend all out-of-state work travel by Judiciary staff, cancel all non-essential events including tours, and hold all conferences and committee meetings via video.

On March 15, New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission Chief Administrator Sue Fulton has announced that all New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission agency and road testing facilities were to be closed effectively immediately as a measure to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The administration estimates re-opening in two weeks, on Monday, March 30.

All drivers license, non-driver IDs, vehicle registrations, and inspection stickers expiring before May 31 have been extended by two months.

Most renewals, replacements, change of address and other transactions can be processed online at NJMVC.gov.

Residents with questions about COVID-19 can call the NJ COVID-19 and Poison Center Public Hotline at (800) 962-1253 or (800) 222-1222 or visit nj.gov/health. The hotline is not to locate testing, to get results, or for medical advice.

Notice to City of Cape May Water Customers...

All water mains serving the City of Cape May will be “flushed” to remove build up of rust and sediment in the pipes, thereby improving water quality, between Monday March 23 & Wed April 8, 7 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. as shown below. **While flushing does not cut off your water supply, it does STIR UP rust, customers SHOULD NOT do any laundry during 7am-4pm while flushing is in your scheduled area.**

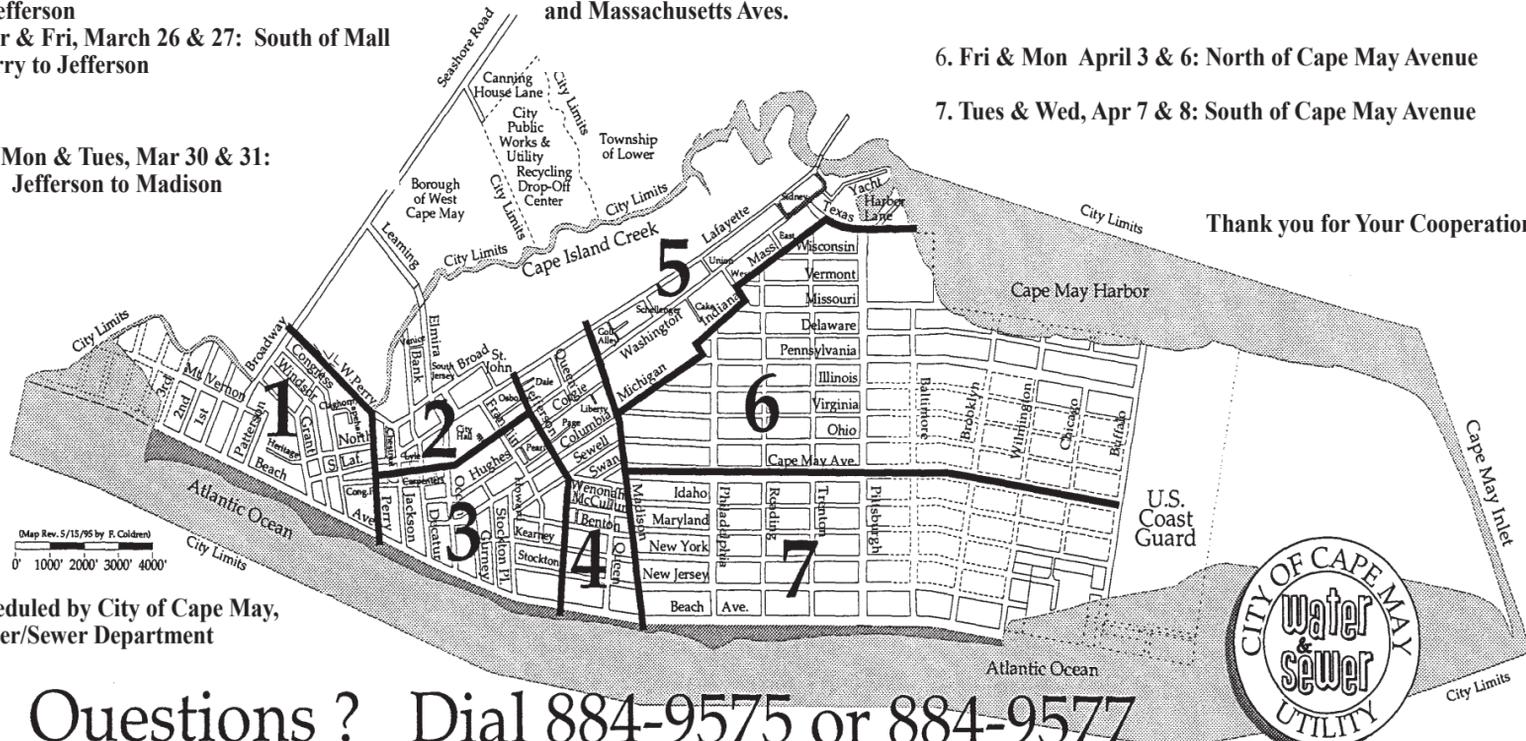
1. Mon, & Tues March 23 & 24 West of Perry St.
2. Wednesday, March 25: North of Mall, Perry to Jefferson
3. Thur & Fri, March 26 & 27: South of Mall Perry to Jefferson

4. Mon & Tues, Mar 30 & 31: Jefferson to Madison

5. Wed & Thurs Apr 1 & 2: North of Michigan, Indiana and Massachusetts Aves.

6. Fri & Mon April 3 & 6: North of Cape May Avenue

7. Tues & Wed, Apr 7 & 8: South of Cape May Avenue



Questions ? Dial 884-9575 or 884-9577

Scheduled by City of Cape May, Water/Sewer Department

Thank you for Your Cooperation