

Daily News

Wednesday, December 15, 2021

Local legislators talk funding, COVID-19 during legislative update

By [Brandon Schreur](#) | on December 15, 2021



Standing in for Sen. Rick Outman, R-Six Lakes, who couldn't make Monday's Legislative Update session, former state senator Judy Emmons speaks on an economic development package currently being discussed in the state of Michigan that looks to provide businesses with funding to expand operations or create jobs. — DN Photo | Brandon Schreur

GREENVILLE — Whether tied to federal COVID relief monies, car insurance packages or an economic development package currently being worked on by the state of Michigan, local leaders and representatives repeatedly discussed the topic of funding, be it at the state or federal level, on Monday.

Last Thursday, the Michigan Senate passed a series of bills that see state funds diverted to businesses interested in expanding their operations or creating jobs, which has been a topic that's been the center of much debate after Ford Motor Co. recently decided to construct new plants in Tennessee and Kentucky rather than Michigan.

The subject matter came up during Montcalm County's Legislative Update session at Montcalm Community College's Greenville campus on Monday.

"It (the package) is over at the House, and they'll all be in session this week," said former state senator Judy Emmons, who was standing in for Sen. Rick Outman, R-Six Lakes, who was unable to attend the session. "There have been

discussions about economic development for decades. If you're going to compete, you must have something in place that companies are looking for.

“Certainly, your workforce. Certainly, your (battery) electrolytes. Certainly, your infrastructure. Certainly, your parks and rec. All of those things are part of the package when companies are looking to locate. I don't know — every company probably puts different weight on each one of those. That package is in the House, and you'll see more of that this week as they ponder that and discuss it.”

Rep. Pat Outman, R-Six Lakes, said the package not only provides tax incentives aimed to attract large corporations to Michigan, but also helps retain the ones — such as automotive manufacturers, specifically — already located in Michigan.

“While I'm not generally a fan of these policies that are related to corporate welfare — which picks winners and losers, and prioritizes large corporations over small businesses — I think we're seeing this take place in a direct reaction to Ford choosing to expand their EV (electric vehicle) battery operation outside of Michigan,” he said. “That caused a lot of people to panic. We're the automotive capital in the world, so I understand why we're doing this.



Mid-Michigan District Health Department Health Officer Liz Braddock speaks on the rising level of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in Montcalm County during Monday's Legislative Update session. — DN Photo | Brandon Schreur

“We want to continue being the automotive capital of the world; however, until we start addressing some of the underlying issues plaguing our state — such as a lack of a skilled workforce or a thriving workforce in general, infrastructure issues — we're going to continue to see Michigan getting passed up for other states. That's why I focus much of my energy on making Michigan more of a business-friendly state that has lower taxes, a more stable regulatory system and a thriving workforce that is ready to go.”

With those ideas in mind, Outman said he's in the process of spearheading a separate economic development government subsidy reform package to address some of those issues.

“We can't seem to get away from these large corporate welfare and economic development policies,” he said. “If we're going to do them, I want to make sure we're tightening up these deals and making them more transparent to the public when their tax dollars are being handed out. It also will hold more accountability to recipients of these deals. That's something I'm actively working on right now. It's been a pet project of mine for a couple of months. I'm

finally getting to the point where it's going to be working its way through the committee process, and then on to both chambers to hopefully get voted on and then passed in front of the governor.”

Regarding the federal COVID funds that Michigan has received, Outman says the state has already identified a number of areas as to where a portion of that money will be spent — including treating COVID patients and providing COVID testing, easing healthcare worker shortages, law enforcement, schools and more.

“We still have about \$10 million to spend from the federal government,” he said. “As I mentioned before, a lot of those dollars do have strings attached to them — whether it's infrastructure-related or COVID-related. Nonetheless, we don't have discretion over how some of that money is spent. We do have flexibility on a portion of those dollars.”

Outman and Melissa Fish of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's office also spoke on the recent announcement that Michigan drivers would receive \$400 checks for every vehicle they own that's insured through the state. That funding comes from the Michigan Catastrophic Claims Association (MCCA) due to a surplus within the industry.



Those attending Monday's Legislative Update session at Montcalm Community College's Greenville campus listen to updates from local and state leaders about state and federal funding, COVID-19 cases and more. — DN Photo | Brandon Schreur

According to Fish, MCCA will provide the money to the insurance companies by March 9, 2022. The insurance companies then have until May 2 to get that money out to insurance policy-holders.

“I do have a couple of questions that need to be clarified regarding that,” Outman said. “I don't know if it's every single vehicle or folks that still have elected to have unlimited PIP (Personal Injury Protection) coverage. I still haven't received clarity on that. That's something I'll be looking for this week or in the next few weeks, just to get some clarity on that refund that's going to be taking place.”

“The refund is definitely a direct result of the car insurance reforms that were approved by the legislature in 2019,” he continued. “As you might know, the reforms required the MCCA to conduct an audit and refund drivers for surpluses when the fund is covering 120 percent of project liabilities.”

COVID-19 update

Mid-Michigan District Health Department Health Officer Liz Braddock also provided a brief COVID update during Monday's session. While Braddock didn't have exact figures, she said the numbers of COVID cases and hospitalization in Montcalm County are "increased."

"We are trying our best to keep the schools open, and we are trying our best to offer as much testing as we can," she said. "Spectrum (Hospital) has stepped up and has monoclonal antibodies for those who are severely sick. We have plenty of vaccines, we have plenty of boosters."

Braddock said the local health department is continuing to keep a close eye on the Omicron variant. As of Friday, Braddock said there was one reported case of Omicron in Kent County, but there's been no further information about it in the local area beyond that.

"Be vigilant. Get vaccinated. Wear your mask," she said.

In regards to the upswing of cases, Braddock said it could partially be because of the easily-transmissible Delta variant. She also noted that trends and behaviors could be a factor.

"People are doing things this year that they didn't do last year," she said. "Say, for example, you may go to a Christmas party. You may go to a Christmas party and not wear a mask. You may go to a Christmas party where people haven't been vaccinated. Those are the type of situations where you're more likely to get exposed. Being exposed means you should quarantine. Quarantining means you need to stay home, stay home for work. People need to keep businesses open, so it's a bit of a cyclical situation."

"Vaccine rates are lower in Montcalm County," she additionally noted. "We're in the lowest 10 counties in the state. That's affecting us having a higher rate (of cases)."

Daily News

Wednesday, January 5, 2021

BRANDON SCHREUR: Testing positive ... again

By [Brandon Schreur](#) | on January 05, 2022



Brandon Schreur

I had hoped that testing positive for COVID-19 in 2020 was going to be my only first-hand experience with the virus.

That hope was in vain.

For the second time in two years, I tested positive for COVID. It happened just before Christmas this time, meaning I spent the holidays hunkered down in the back room of my house, isolating from people and watching re-runs of “The Office.”

Some context: I tested positive for the first time in November 2020, a few weeks before Thanksgiving. Things were somewhat different back then. I felt fine for the majority of the time while in quarantine, but that was before any vaccine was introduced and when COVID cases were on a serious upswing. We all had a bunch of questions back then that we, even still, may or may not have answers to.

I received both dosages of the Pfizer vaccine in April 2021 and hoped that would be the end of things. And, for a while, it was. Like everyone else, my summer and fall may not have been completely normal when compared to 2019, but it felt normal-ish, at least — and isn’t that maybe the best we could all ask for after the roller-coaster that was 2020?

With my booster shot scheduled for the week between Christmas and New Year’s, that appointment wound up being canceled when COVID came knocking again.



A COVID-19 rapid test shows a positive result for Daily News Staff Writer Brandon Schreur. — DN Photo | Brandon Schreur

Having to put holiday plans on hold after a rapid test came back positive wasn't a great feeling, I'll admit. But do you know what would have been an even worse feeling? Ignoring the signs and not getting tested, only to then pass it on to my friends, family and co-workers. That would have been bad. As tired and sick of COVID as we all surely are, ignoring symptoms or pretending it has completely vanished isn't the answer.

I said it when I wrote a column about testing positive for COVID for the first time and I'm going to say it again: I was one of the lucky ones. I only had symptoms for a day or two, while other people out there are still being hospitalized and dying from the disease. I can grumble and complain about lost time, but I really don't have anybody to blame and I am very fortunate that things weren't worse than they were.

And so, I'm going to go ahead and encourage people to keep listening to the guidance we get from local health department representatives (see accompanying story) and the Centers for Disease Control Prevention (CDC). Get vaccinated, if possible. Get tested, if applicable. Wear a mask, when it makes sense.

Maybe things are getting better like some people say and maybe they're getting worse like others say (one of my New Year's resolutions is to stop reading into what people are posting on Twitter so much and to start looking at the actual case numbers and statistics on a more regular basis), but near as I can tell, that's the only way we're going to beat this thing.

I also can't write this entire column without mentioning the fact that, while I was stuck inside, my parents prepared and dropped off a Christmas feast at my house on the 25th, for which I'll forever be grateful. And if you find yourself in a situation where you need to quarantine and have suddenly found yourself with some isolated spare time on your hands, I can confirm that watching (or re-watching) the "Godfather" trilogy is an EXCELLENT way to spend it.

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Local health department leaders talk COVID, new CDC quarantine guidelines

By [Brandon Schreur](#) | on January 05, 2022



Jodie Faber of Greenville, left, gets a COVID-19 vaccine from the Mid-Michigan District Health Department. — Submitted photo | Mid-Michigan District Health Department

Entering into 2022, local health departments are continuing to urge people to continue taking precautions against COVID-19, especially as new variants — particularly omicron — continue to emerge.

Montcalm County had 338 weekly cases per 100,000 that were reported between Dec. 27 and Jan. 2, with a 21.9% seven-day positive test rate for the same dates.

Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) Health Officer Liz Braddock said it's too soon to tell if case numbers and hospitalizations will increase as a result of people gathering for the holidays.

“Our school case numbers have reduced during the school break,” she said. “Montcalm County numbers have remained steady over the last two weeks.”

Ionia County Health Officer Ken Bowen said his county's health department saw a “slight bump” between the week before and the week after Christmas, but that overall positive cases numbers trended downward over the past month.

“Locally, we appear to be in a trough between the delta surge and the omicron surge,” he said. “The omicron surge has yet to hit locally.”

According to the Michigan Safe Start Map, approximately 538 weekly cases per 100,000 were reported between Dec. 27 and Jan. 2. The county also reported a seven-day positive test rate between Dec. 27 and Jan. 2 of 24.3%.

Bowen and Braddock said there are also cases that are likely going unreported, but it’s impossible to quantify exactly how many. Braddock said those who test positive through a home test can self-report the results at mmdhd.org.

In regards to omicron, both the MMDHD and Ionia County Health Department have begun taking precautions, even if testing for specific variants has proven to be challenging.

“Omicron is more contagious than delta, which is itself more contagious than previous variants,” Bowen said. “It is almost certainly present in Ionia County, but we don’t know how prevalent yet, and we haven’t yet seen a case surge from omicron. This follows a pattern throughout the pandemic that Ionia County tends to surge after the more populated areas of the state. For omicron to be identified, the sample has to be sent to the state laboratory with a specific request to do genetic analysis. This request is usually made by a physician. A typical test will not tell you if you have omicron, only whether you have COVID-19 in general.”

“Taking steps to reduce the spread of infection, including getting a COVID-19 vaccine, are the best ways to slow the emergence of new variants,” Braddock added. “Tests for COVID-19 tell you if you have an infection at the time of the test. This type of test is called a ‘viral’ test because it looks for viral infection. Additional tests would be needed to determine which variant caused the infection, but these typically do not occur since the omicron and delta variants have already been identified in many Michigan counties.”

Details about how easily omicron spreads compared to delta also remains unknown, Braddock said, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) expects that anyone with the omicron infection can spread it to others even if they are vaccinated or don’t have symptoms.

“COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalizations and death, and masks offer protection against all variants,” she noted. “The CDC continues to recommend wearing a mask in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high community transmission, regardless of vaccination status.”

Braddock said vaccine appointments and booster doses are available at the MMDHD office in Stanton, which can be contacted at (989) 831-5237. Vaccines.gov also lists site listings of local pharmacies and grocery stores that offer vaccine appointments.



Hailey Brewer of the Mid-Michigan District Health Department receives a COVID-19 vaccine. — Submitted photo | Mid-Michigan District Health Department

Bowen said the Ionia County Health Department also offers vaccines and can be contacted at (616) 527-5341.

COVID testing sites can be found at michigan.gov/coronavirus.

“Sparrow Ionia Hospital offers drive-through PCR COVID-19 tests (PCR is the more sensitive type of test), and antigen tests (rapid tests) are available at most pharmacies,” Bowen added.

NEW CDC GUIDELINES

On Dec. 27, the CDC updated recommended isolation and quarantine period for the general population. The new guidelines state that people who test positive for COVID should isolate for five days, regardless of vaccination status. Following that, if they are asymptomatic or their symptoms are resolving (without fever for 24 hours), the CDC recommends wearing a mask around others for an additional five days to minimize the risk of infecting people they encounter.

“The change is motivated by science demonstrating that the majority of SARS-CoV-2 transmissions occurs early in the course of illness, generally in the 1-2 days prior to the onset of symptoms and the 2-3 days after,” the CDC said in a press release.

Additionally, the CDC updated the recommended quarantine period of anyone in the general public who is exposed to COVID.

“For people who are unvaccinated or are more than six months out from their second mRNA dose (or more than two months after the J&J vaccine) and not yet boosted, CDC now recommends quarantine for five days followed by strict mask use for an additional five days,” the press release says. “Alternatively, if a five-day quarantine is not feasible, it

is imperative that an exposed person wear a well-fitting mask at all times when around others for 10 days after exposure.

“Individuals who have received their booster shot do not need to quarantine following an exposure, but should wear a mask for 10 days after the exposure. For all those exposed, best practice would also include a test for SARS-CoV-2 at day five after exposure. If symptoms occur, individuals should immediately quarantine until a negative test confirms symptoms are not attributable to COVID-19.”

Bowen said the Ionia County Health Department supports the CDC’s guidance, but he emphasized that the guidelines don’t state that anyone and everyone should only self-isolate for five days when testing positive.

“Isolation for a positive person is reduced from 10 days to five days only if they are asymptomatic or their symptoms are drastically improved by day five. Otherwise, they should isolate for 10 days,” he said. “Even if they only have to isolate five days, the expectation is that they wear a mask in public for an additional five days. If someone isn’t willing to wear a mask, they should isolate the full 10 days.”

Braddock also noted that quarantine guidelines may change depending on somebody’s situation.

“It is important to know that the revised CDC guidance is aimed only at the general population and that masking is an important piece to making it successful,” she said. “Special populations such as schools, daycares, long-term care and jails should follow the original isolation and quarantine guidance for 10 days.”

Gratiot County Herald

Thursday, January 13, 2021

Velsicol Burn Pit To Receive Millions From EPA For Cleanup

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

Eight days before Christmas, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced a \$1 billion investment from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to initiate cleanup and clear the backlog of 49 previously unfunded Superfund sites and accelerate cleanup at dozens of other sites across the country.

The Velsicol Burn Pit in St. Louis is one of four Michigan Superfund sites selected to receive funding. Until this historic investment, many of these were part of a backlog of hazardous waste sites awaiting funding. The other Michigan sites include the Charlevoix Municipal Well in Charlevoix, the Tar Lake Site in Mancelona Township, and Ten-Mile Drain in Saint Clair Shores.

“For more than 100 years, the upper Midwest was the nation’s industrial center. But when factories and mills closed they left behind a legacy of toxic sites that are challenging to clean up,” said EPA Regional Administrator Debra Shore. “The bipartisan infrastructure law will fund stalled cleanups at seven Superfund sites in Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Indiana and accelerate our efforts to restore and revitalize communities here in the Midwest.”

According to an EPA press release, the infrastructure funds will be used to implement EPA’s selected remedy for the main source areas of contamination within the former burn pit boundaries, including treating the source materials posing the highest threat, excavating ash piles, and hooking up several nearby residences to the municipal water supply as a precautionary measure. Once the source area cleanup is complete, EPA will evaluate the groundwater and create a plan to address the contamination.

For lifelong Gratiot County residents like Jane Keon, the response has been a longtime coming. Keon is a founding member of the Pine River Superfund Citizen Task Force, an EPA-sanctioned Community Advisory Group that is overseeing the cleanup of chemical contamination in St. Louis. She literally wrote the book, entitled *Tombstone Town*, about the first 16 years of the task force and its Herculean efforts to convince people at both local and national levels of the awful mess left by the chemical company.

“We’ve made a lot of progress,” Keon said. “It’s still slow. None of us had any idea how severe the problems were in St. Louis. Even the EPA didn’t know. As they moved forward, they would find more problems.” With those problems finally acknowledged, the remedies remain forthcoming. “Many Michigan families and local communities have been waiting way too many years to have toxic Superfund sites cleaned up in their own backyards. The recently passed infrastructure bill is going to finally make the cleanup of these sites a reality in Charlevoix, Mancelona, St. Louis, and St. Clair Shores,” said Sen. Debbie Stabenow. “These are the kind of investments that will help strengthen our local economies and keep our families safe for generations to come.” Even local politicians were encouraged by the [news](#). “EPA and EGLE have been working for many years to clean up the plant site and the adjacent area including over nine square blocks of residential property and the Pine River,” said Jim Kelly in one of his final days as St. Louis mayor. “The last big step is to clean up the burn pit, one of the worst early Superfund sites. We look forward to having this area cleaned; otherwise, it may continue to pollute our ground water.”

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What seems clear is the consistency in which Velsicol polluted both the Pine River and St. Louis. Back in the day, factory fumes literally peeled paint off nearby houses. And years later, as the waste had not been properly contained, Keon said, “We commissioned a bird study because a lot of people in the neighborhood were finding dead birds in their yards.”

With a wildlife toxicologist from Michigan State University, they discovered 12 contaminated blocks after the published study in 2013. By 2015, The EPA was attempting to rectify it.

Time and money are factors in all of it. Though the latest news is encouraging, Keon said you can usually double the estimates on time resolutions from the EPA.