

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITY

General Assembly Continues During Unprecedented Times

BY JAMES DECHENE

LAST MARCH, the General Assembly went into recess prior to the annual Joint Finance Committee meeting break. Amid the “See you in six weeks” goodbyes were a handful of pending bills and the beginning discussions around seemingly mundane things like what the rest of session would look like and starting to plan the Chamber’s End-of-Session Brunch, Manufacturing Day, and Small Business Day in Dover events. Then came COVID-19, which, as we all know now, would go on to upend virtually every aspect of our lives, making the mundane a thing of the past.

Along the way those events would eventually take place, virtually. So would an election, bringing to Dover a large, new crop of legislators excited to represent their constituents after a campaign like no other. In furtherance of the “new normal” (I, like many of you, am so tired of that term), the new General Assembly would continue to meet virtually, swearing in of new legislators would be held via Zoom, and we’ve all gotten to navigate session days and committee meetings with the inevitable plea of “Can you hear me?”.

One aspect I find myself sorely missing (and for those who know me, the irony on this is thick like pancake syrup) is the personal interactions at Legislative Hall – not just between lobbyists and legislators, but for the general public and for legislators to make their collegial relationships stronger as well. This new normal is certainly different. Trying to make eye contact during a meeting, but not sure if you should be looking at the camera or at the screen in order to see how the meeting is going is but one change, insignificant as it may seem.

The new normal has also brought with it legislation that will impact State Chamber members in new and interesting ways. There are certainly bills that are introduced on a regular basis, like minimum wage, personal income tax changes, and bills that impact human resources or consumer protections, like data privacy. But there are also bills that are more reflective of what is happening in states around us, and nationwide. Marijuana legalization, environmental justice related to legacy business activities, and changing the nature of what has traditionally been the role of the employer – such as offering retirement plans, which will potentially be offered by government – are each small examples of what this year and next will bring.



Throughout this year, if there’s one lesson I’ve learned it is how important it is for small- and medium-sized employers in Delaware to educate their elected officials about themselves. There are approximately 57,000 licensed businesses in Delaware, and an estimated 825 have 50 or more employees. The remaining 56,000-plus have employees that choose to work for them and are engaged in meaningful careers important for Delaware’s future. The stories of how employers became creative to keep their workforce employed over the last year, offered training opportunities, provided benefits, and pivoted to new economic avenues to keep the lights on are all important for legislators to hear in a time where those stories are drowned out by the other side.

One of the State Chamber’s main responsibilities to its members is advocacy, helping employers share these stories. We curate events throughout the year, like Small Business Day in Dover each May, and work with individual members to connect with their elected officials and showcase the good work being done across Delaware.

No one is as good a storyteller about your business and successes than you.



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