

Opinion: For Gov. Murphy, public safety and economic health are a balancing act

CARL GOLDEN | NOVEMBER 9, 2020 | [OPINION](#)

NJ's fragile economy and looming 2021 election make the governor hesitant to impose another COVID-19 lockdown



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With daily COVID-19 infections surging past 2,000 — the most in six months — and hospitalizations breaching 1,300, Gov. Phil Murphy is faced once again with balancing public safety and economic health.

The specter of another statewide shutdown of businesses and public gathering locations hangs heavy and, if public health experts are correct, will intensify as the winter months approach, dramatically reducing outdoor activity and confining people to close-quarter locations that breed and transmit the virus.

The potential for businesses that barely survived the summer and continue to struggle to remain solvent being forced to suspend operations again is devastatingly high.

Murphy is loath to reimpose a lockdown — even a partial one — not only because of the brutal impact on the state's fragile economic health but, with the 2021 election looming large, also the likelihood that the pandemic and his every decision to confront it will crowd out all other issues during the campaign months.

He's enjoyed consistently high popular support for his performance thus far, despite grumbling and grouching about the pace of reopening restaurants, entertainment venues and commercial establishments.

Even his administration's borrowing an unprecedented \$4 billion to overcome a state budget decimated by the pandemic was accomplished quickly and relatively smoothly, despite it being cited as a factor in last week's downgrade of the state's credit rating.

New measures to curb COVID-19?

He's spoken in very nonspecific terms of taking broader action in the coming weeks to control and turn back the long predicted second wave of the virus. But aside from continuing to urge public compliance with safety measures — mask wearing, social distancing, etc. — Murphy has not discussed additional steps under consideration or when they would be employed.

While he's attributed the increase in cases and hospitalizations to family and friends gathering in private homes, singling them out as the sole factor for the resurgence is problematic.

The reopening of public schools, as well as colleges and university students returning to campus and relaxed restrictions on indoor dining have certainly contributed to the spread of the virus.

Murphy is understandably reluctant to return to the level of controls that carried the state through the spring and summer but his hand may be forced if hospitals once again approach capacity, testing sites are overwhelmed, and medical personnel and protective equipment run short.

While infections and hospitalizations have risen, the death toll has not, a result of vastly greater testing capability, early identification of infections, and faster and more effective treatment, resulting in saving lives.

Murphy has largely bypassed Legislature

To this point, Murphy has effectively utilized his emergency powers to implement and enforce executive orders and has largely bypassed the Legislature, a slight that hasn't gone unnoticed by members of that body and one which they say should be corrected.

If it becomes necessary to return to the spring and summer days of lockdown and shutdown, the howls of outrage over failure to consult with and seek legislative sanction will grow in volume and intensity, amplified by the heat of gubernatorial and legislative election campaigns.

Murphy has endured similar outcries by placing his actions in the context of public safety and the compelling need to respond rapidly to suddenly changed conditions — an environment that forecloses the more leisurely pace of legislative debate and consideration.

While there have been suggestions, some in legislative form, to curtail Murphy's executive powers, critics seem content for the moment to use the issue as a political cudgel rather than take action to rein him in.

In the back of their minds lurks a fear that a more substantive involvement by the Legislature carries a risk of major political blowback should the crisis deepen and the Legislature fail to act quickly and decisively.

A contrast with Trump administration

The governor's defense of governing by executive order has held up well in the public consciousness as a highly desirable attribute of leadership in a time of crisis. The broad public

support he's enjoyed since the pandemic's outset is a direct result not only of his actions but of his communications skills, visible presence, candid explanations and convincing New Jerseyans they, too, are an integral part of the solution.

Fairly or not, his administration's response to the pandemic has been contrasted with that of the Trump administration and has come off exceptionally well.

Conventional wisdom has it that President Trump's narrow loss to former Vice President Joe Biden was attributable in significant measure to the often chaotic and rudderless presidential response.

There is certainly a truth there and one not lost on Murphy.

He will, though, be sorely tested in the coming weeks and months should the pandemic rage on and it becomes necessary to impose many of the restrictions so recently relaxed.

While doing so in the middle of an election campaign — one that may be significantly unlike any before — will be a test for Murphy, it will be an even more rigorous one for his Republican opponent, who will be called upon to explain what he or she would have done differently or more effectively.

It is not an overstatement to suggest that people are fearful. Parents are concerned for children, elderly relatives and those with underlying medical conditions that make them seriously vulnerable.

While they are willing to accept the “wear a mask, stay 6 feet apart, remain at home and hope for a vaccine” advice, they look also to government to provide the leadership and decisiveness to turn the light at the end of the tunnel into a torch.

If reaching that point requires closed schools and vastly reduced business activity, so be it.

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