

John Imes: Making the economy work for all

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Today, when both the physical health and economic health of our community are at risk from COVID-19, business as usual and politics as usual is no longer an option.

For us to come out of this crisis altogether healthier, stronger, and more resilient as a community, we need policymakers to implement high-road, progressive policies and stand up for local businesses.

The American Sustainable Business Council (ASBC) is convening a national working group of business leaders, activists, and economists in a collaborative effort to prepare policy responses to COVID-19 and lay the groundwork for a stronger, more sustainable and resilient recovery. Among the many dozens of recommendations identified so far, include:

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- Prioritizing worker health and safety through widespread testing, personal protective equipment (PPE) for all essential workers, contact tracing, enhanced telemedicine and public health protocols so businesses can reopen, stay open and operate safely.
- Expanded sick leave and paid family and medical leave so workers can stay safe at home if they are ill or need to care for a sick family member.
- Expanded healthcare access, affordability and Medicaid services to close the coverage gaps in health insurance.
- Expanded unemployment eligibility to provide more economic relief directly to workers. "Wisconsin's Work-Share program helps small businesses avoid layoffs, allowing workers to remain employed and employers to retain trained

staff during times of reduced business activity.”

- Expanded access to capital from local investors and prioritizing state procurement for local small businesses and entrepreneurs.
- Investments in public infrastructure including expanded broadband services, particularly for those in underserved urban and rural areas.

How do we pay for expanded benefits and high-road investments when our next state budget will be severely impacted by COVID-19? One option: dismantle all the traditional economic development incentives that benefit large, non-local multinational corporations like Foxconn and redirect them to Main Street local businesses. In fact, studies show locally owned businesses generate two to four times the jobs, income and wealth of non-local businesses. Another option? Promote a more equitable tax system by ending unaffordable tax incentives including the \$100+ million in credits that will go to Wisconsin filers who earned over \$3 million last year.

Next, our goal should be to make the state a model for high-road practices and provide further incentives to those that adopt them and enact legislation requiring them. Providing a livable fair wage, family-friendly benefits, work-life balance, education and technical training, and a “just transition”, particularly for women, immigrants, and people of color, will help reduce social/economic disparities and make an economic recovery for all possible.

Resilience to bounce back from future crises

Finally, to build a long-term, resilient recovery and help protect against future systematic threats, we need a broad Wisconsin based plan that includes the innovative policies to be a leader in clean energy, climate action, sustainable communities, regional transit, smarter — more affordable housing, food security, flood resilience and entrepreneurship — a plan that attracts investment and more well-paying, accessible jobs and helps restore Wisconsin’s leadership tradition.

We can recover from these challenging times, but only if we bridge the divide in our politics and work together to lay a foundation of high-road progressive policies and practices that take better care of our local businesses, workers, families and communities. Indeed, isn’t that what making the economy work for all is all about?

— *Imes is executive director of Wisconsin Environmental Initiative and a member of the ASBC national working group.*