

Protesters rally at state Capitol against Evers' stay-at-home order

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Hundreds gathered around the Capitol square Friday to protest Gov. Tony Evers' stay-at-home order, arguing it was their God-given right to move about freely and run their businesses as they wish.

Protesters filled the Capitol steps leading to State Street, carrying signs calling for the state to reopen and knocking Evers as "Tony the tyrant" and demanding his recall. Evers' initial stay-at-home order had been set to end Friday before it was extended to May 26.

Elected officials largely stayed away from the protest, but Sen. Kathy Bernier, R-Chippewa Falls, touted a lawsuit Republican lawmakers filed with the state Supreme Court to overturn Evers' order, drawing cheers from the crowd.

Bernier also talked up a new plan that Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce released hours ahead of the protest. That plan would use a formula to determine when businesses could reopen and any mitigation steps they'd have to take while operating.

"If the governor knows what's good for him, he'll back the back-to-business plan," Bernier said.

An estimated 1,500 protesters turned out despite the gov's ban on gatherings of more than 10 people. Those congregated also largely ignored directives on social distancing, though some in the crowd wore masks. The state Department of Administration denied organizers a permit for the event, citing the stay-at-home order. But police made no effort to disperse the crowd, and there were no arrests or citations.

National attention on the protest has built over the past week, particularly after Wisconsin went forward with its spring election amid the COVID-19 pandemic. With that spotlight in mind, state GOP Treasurer Brian Westrate earlier in the week posted a message to a private Facebook group imploring people to leave

Confederate flags and long guns at home.

But pockets of protesters roamed the Capitol square with long guns over their shoulders.

That included Duncan Lemp, 21, who said he came to the protest to exercise his rights. He explained his decision to carry a rifle because “free men don’t ask permission.” Lemp declined to say where he’s from other than he’s a Wisconsin resident.

“People have given up their rights so quickly for safety, and it scares me,” Lemp said.

The crowd was dominated by those opposed to Evers’ order with cars ringing the Capitol square honking their horns and a line that stretched down East Washington Avenue waiting to join the display.

But Dr. Angela Janis, a psychiatrist at Mendota Health Institute, stood at the foot of the Capitol’s State Street steps in scrubs and a facemask with a sign that read, “Please Go Home.”

Janis, 40, said she lives near the Capitol and came to the protest on her day off to provide a counter-message. She bemoaned the message from the protesters that ignored the dangers of COVID-19 and worried about the possible impact of so many people gathering in one cluster in downtown Madison.

She noted Dane County’s success in bending the curve of infections but wondered if that would be undercut.

“If anything this is going to be the event that I worry is bringing it right to my front door,” she said.

State Dem Party Chair Ben Wikler slammed the protest, telling reporters on a conference call ahead of the gathering it could “spread infections, cost lives, and delay the point at which it’s safe to reopen the economy.”

“No one likes safer-at-home, but what we are doing now is what we have to do so that we can reopen our economy and we can put people back to work as quickly as possible,” he said.

Wikler also said President Trump “helped incite these protests.”

“He sent a series of tweets urging people to liberate states,” Wikler said. “Trump bears personal responsibility.”



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People gathered in Delafield April 24, 2020, to head to Madison for a protest of the Evers administration's stay-at-home order. Photo by David Wise.



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The protest also included complaints that a U.S. flag wasn't flying above the Capitol. But the Department of Administration pointed out in its crowd estimate that the U.S. and Wisconsin flags fly over the building's east wing, the opposite side from the protest.

The POW-MIA flag flies above the north wing, while the south and west wings are the responsibility of the Senate and Assembly, respectively. U.S. flags fly there when they're in session.

Protesters poured into Madison from various parts of the state, and a crowd of about 200 people gathered in the parking lot of the Smiley Barn in Delafield to caravan into the capital city.

Many of the roughly 150 vehicles were decked out with window paint, signs and American flags.

Among the messages were those that read “bounce Evers,” “end the tyranny,” “all jobs are essential,” and “recall Evers.”

The parking lot gathering had a bit of a festive feel. A man dressed as President Trump gave impromptu interviews. And a pair of young women were selling signs with an image of Evers that read “worst governor Evers” for \$20 each, one of whom carried a sign explaining that her employer is closed and she is saving money for school.

Larry Chapman of East Troy said he was heading to Madison to protest what he described as a “one-size-fits-all” approach Evers has taken to address the pandemic.

He expressed concerns about people not being able to access needed care such as cancer treatments due to restrictions on hospitals. He said hospitals should have continued operating normally in areas of the state that have few or no COVID-19 cases with emergency action plans in place in case of a local outbreak.

Mike Moeller of Remy Battery agreed and said Evers’ approach has harmed businesses and will hurt the state budget through decreased tax revenue.

See a slideshow of the protest:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/2020/stay-at-home-order-protest/>