

Robin Janson: Our PPP loan will fall short

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Like many local Wisconsin businesses the pandemic took us by complete surprise. What shocked us was how far reaching the economic impact would be. As a reclaimed furniture, flooring and lumber company, we thought we'd experience a slowdown, but here we are, 6 months out, and there is little end in sight to getting our core business moving again.

We have been in business 23 years and have 35 employees. The bulk of our customers are retail stores, hotels, restaurants and corporate offices. In those first few months, orders from most of these clients were postponed or cancelled as the first wave of economic closures hit.

In spring, we were helped by a PPP loan, but were hopeful that by now we would be closer to some turning point. For our business, that would mean that restart of design and construction of closed offices, hotels, restaurants, and retail stores. However, we are facing another round of delays. We now fear, with the growth in virus numbers across the country, these delays will last through the first half of next year.

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What's frustrating is that it didn't have to be this way. If the appropriate concern and support was given to this crisis from the beginning, we could have flattened our curve like most other developed nations. Instead, we are still hanging on to uncertainty and short term solutions. We are also witnessing our representatives, particularly in the Senate, appear unwilling and unable to do what it takes to

compromise on some necessary interventions.

Our business was able to secure a PPP loan, like many other local companies, but those loan amounts were based on 2 months of downturn. It did not reach the scale necessary to handle an ongoing virus and fears of another Covid19 spike this fall. We spent those first 2 months expanding product lines to focus on areas of growth, but we are painfully aware that these new sales opportunities will take time to develop. Another 6-9 months of expanding virus and uncertainty is an endless storm that few small businesses will be able to weather.

We've got a great community who has supported us through this challenging time. People are looking out for each other, and we are grateful that taking precautions and being safe is a statewide mandate. Our employees have been amazing, but we are all concerned about the uncertainty everywhere we look. This month we can add concerns for our staff who are trying to work while also setting their kids up for remote learning.

While our business is hurting, it kills me to know that smaller Main Street businesses are even more vulnerable. While we are fighting to avoid more loss, debt, and lay-offs, many of our small business peers who were not able to even access the initial short-term PPP loans, aren't going to make it. It's clear that aid did not reach the most vulnerable, as the Small Business administration recently showed that Black-owned businesses are still closed at three times the rate of white-owned businesses.

Senator Baldwin, Senator Johnson and Representative Gallagher, please come together, as you did with the CARES Act and pass a relief package to help sustain small business. We can't just wait and see. Wisconsin's small businesses need urgent, direct relief and our employees and neighbors need robust unemployment so that our consumer dollars don't shrink even further.

We are a company that builds things to last and so we know what it takes. Unfortunately, that first relief package is proving to be grossly inadequate for the task at hand. Major comprehensive structural support is needed which takes a commitment to think boldly, and compromise to turn it into legislative action. The window to get ahead of this looming long term economic crisis is rapidly closing. It will take the political will of representatives across the aisle to get it done.

-Janson is the owner of Urban Evolution in Appleton and a member of the Wisconsin

Main Street Alliance.