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The next chapter: Reopening means challenge from workers to fundraising

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Pools are back, hoping to make a splash. Movie theaters are soon expected to unwind. Indoor seating is again available in restaurants.

But every venue, from bowling lanes to ice rinks, is a surreal version of what it had been — still caged up by the coronavirus that continues to plague a populace growing wearier by the day.

And businessmen are among the weariest of the lot. They face restrictions on gatherings, mandates for cleanliness and, in many cases, a struggle to regain their workers.

“You know what our biggest challenge has been? Getting employees. We’re competing against the federal government,” one bar operator told the

Illinois Business Journal, referring to workers who find it more lucrative to stay home on unemployment, despite the possibility of losing benefits for refusing to go back.

Illinois law provides eligible individuals up to 26 weeks of unemployment benefits. The federal stimulus package provides an additional 13 weeks. The federal \$600 weekly unemployment supplement benefit included in the CARES Act is set to expire on July 31, leaving a lot of businessmen in the lurch when it comes to luring back workers. Debate is underway on whether that expiration date should be extended.

Meanwhile, Illinois’ minimum wage increased to \$10 per hour July 1, the second in a series of increases required by a law passed last year. The law requires

the wage to increase by \$1 on Jan. 1 of each year going forward until it reaches \$15 per hour in 2025.

Individuals temporarily laid off because of the COVID-19 crisis are eligible for unemployment benefits so long as they meet all the usual eligibility requirements, which include being separated from employment through no fault of their own, being able and available for work, and actively seeking work. Under the Illinois Department of Employment Security’s “emergency rule,” individuals do not have to register with the state. They are deemed to be actively seeking work as long as they are prepared to return to their jobs as soon as their employers reopen.

Another group of Illinois businesses were allowed to reopen as of June 26,

when Phase 4 of the Restore Illinois plan went into effect. However, Gov. JB Pritzker warned that any drastic increase of COVID-19 numbers could prompt new restrictions.

About 1.4 million Illinoisans applied for unemployment benefits between March and late June. On June 25, the U.S. Department of Labor reported 46,000 people in Illinois had filed for unemployment. That was about 1,300 more than one week earlier.

Reopening under Phase 4 is expected to restore the jobs of 400,000 Illinois residents. The Illinois Department of Public Health collaborated with the Illinois Department of Commerce and

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Commerce park may signal years of development

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

O’Fallon Mayor Herb Roach likes to point out that the Gateway Commerce Center has evolved over 25 years, continuing to bring dividends to its host communities in Edwardsville and Pontoon Beach.

Those same possibilities now exist in O’Fallon, with Gateway’s primary developer, St. Louis-based TriStar Properties, preparing to develop its first building in the Mid America Commerce Center at the new Exit 21 interchange at Rieder Road and Interstate 64 near Scott Air Force Base.

“It’s kind of a big deal for O’Fallon, and even St. Clair County. The county has Belle Valley Industrial Park (in Belleville), but it’s smaller, so they don’t really have anything to compete with Madison County and Gateway,” Roach said.

Potentially, Mid America Commerce Center could offer larger distribution facilities with more storage capability. Those are in short supply nationally in the wake of COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders that have driven e-commerce, Roach said.



A map showing the proposed Mid America Commerce Center at Rieder Road and Shiloh Valley Township Line Road in O’Fallon.

Steve Zuber and Wayne Barber, two of the principals at Shiloh-based BARBERMurphy Group, have the real estate listing on the ground and are looking for tenants.

TriStar Properties purchased 20

acres last year and has options for up to 200 acres, Zuber said. A 10-year tax abatement is offered on improved property, starting with substantial completion of each building. The land is also part of the State of Illinois’ Mid-

America Enterprise Zone.

Developers have circulated a master plan showing eight, sizeable buildings in the park, with much more acreage

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Return to work also means analyzing the workspace, too

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

The workspace of the future may look vastly different from today’s,



Louer



Paris

driven in part by health concerns of the COVID-19 era.

“We’ve all been hearing about ‘return to work,’ but it’s actually about returning to the workplace,” said Jane Louer, the founder and CEO of Louer Facility Planning in Collinsville. “It’s important that businesses have a healthy and efficient space for employees returning from remote situations.”

Louer and her colleague, director of design Yvette Paris, recently spoke online to fellow members of Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois about

the topic. They provided insight into the kinds of changes that employers are considering.

Adjusting for a minimum of six feet of physical distancing may not be possible for all businesses, but attempts should be made to meet the emotional, cognitive and physical needs of workers and customers, Louer said.

Employees must have a sense of wellbeing, she said. There also must be an attempt to understand and preserve the organizational culture. Once you’ve gone through those steps, changes to the

floorplan may or may not be required.

Associates’ safety is the most important consideration.

“Employees should be made comfortable, so they want to come back,” Louer said. “We want to capture (what we felt at home) in our office environment.”

She said a survey of workers can determine who is returning full time, part time or not at all. The survey can address “affordances” — things that

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