

Baker: Data trends will dictate timing of economic reopening

It's all going to depend on the data.

Gov. Charlie Baker would not say Friday afternoon whether he plans to extend the economic shutdown currently due to expire May 4, but he detailed what he will be looking at when it comes time to make that decision.

"We are still in this surge and we need to recognize that this insidious and often invisible virus is still making people here in Massachusetts very sick," the governor said. He later added, "Our view going forward here is going to be that until we start to see some of that kind of information – the peaking of the surge and the move in the other direction – for some sustained period of time, we're not going to be interested in reopening anything."

Baker previously has pointed to White House guidance that recommended states could begin to resume greater levels of economic activity after documenting 14 days of declining case counts and on Friday said his administration plans to follow guidance from the federal government, other countries and public health experts before planning an economic reopening. He said Friday that the duration of positive trends necessary to reopen "varies depending upon who you talk to."

With 50,969 total cases and 4,946 cases newly reported Friday, Baker said Massachusetts is "sitting in what I would call the peak" but that his team has not seen anything in the daily data on testing, new cases, new hospitalizations and deaths "that would suggest that we're over the peak and heading down the other side."

Current conditions would not appear to support a resumption of widespread activity on May 4, which is 10 days away. Asked why he doesn't just extend his order closing non-essential businesses beyond May 4 now, Baker said his team is still following the day-to-day data in search of trends.

"I get the fact that people want a hard and fast answer on this one, and I keep saying that the hard and fast answer is going to be in the trend data," Baker said. He added, "We'll have more to say about it a little closer. I get the fact that people would like an answer, but any answer I give you today wouldn't be worth very much because it's going to be driven by what happens over the course of the next two weeks, which I can't – I don't have a crystal ball, I can't predict."

Earlier this week, the governor said he plans to "pull together the best and brightest minds from our business and public health and academic communities to work together to put together a thoughtful framework that can work in Massachusetts" and on Friday said his administration has already started to talk with public health experts and business leaders about reopening.

He also acknowledged again Friday that the steps the state has taken to staunch the spread of the coronavirus "have had significant economic dislocation for hundreds of thousands of people here in Massachusetts."

About 653,000 Massachusetts residents have filed unemployment claims in the past five weeks, and more than 200,000 others applied for a new unemployment program open to self-employed and gig workers who did not previously qualify. Baker said the state's system for processing claims from newly-eligible workers was launched 10 days ahead of schedule and has already processed more than 100,000 of the new claims.

"On the one hand, it's mindboggling and concerning that so many people are filing for unemployment," he said. "But on the

other hand, I'm glad our system has been able to keep up and actually process claims so that these folks can get the support that they need."

He added, "Sadly, the economic toll that's with us is going to be with us for a while, there's no question about that."

During Friday's press conference, Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders said the administration is filing for two new waivers from the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services in hopes of giving the MassHealth program more flexibility to respond to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

"Our requests include expanding Medicare telehealth coverage to include services provided by phone, as well as video, to increase access to health care for seniors and individuals with disabilities who may not have readily available access to video technology," Sudders said. "Additionally, we're allowing MassHealth flexibility to qualify for coverage for individuals who may be eligible but have not submitted all their forms to the state, providing flexibility with respect to federal provider payments limits to enable MassHealth provide critical stabilization funds for health care providers ... in addition, being able to enroll individuals into MassHealth for 90 day period, while we ensure we have all the documents available for them."

Friday's press conference also marked the return to the podium for Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel, who has recovered from her own bout with COVID-19. She said Friday, "People can and do recover, and we need to remember that."

Baker said he was glad to have Bharel back at work and back at the public updates on the state's fight against COVID-19 and pointed out that the virus he likes to call "insidious" even got to Bharel, a "really committed social distancer."

"Even under that scenario, the virus found a way to get to

her,” he said. “And I think, in many ways, that’s a story that plays out thousands and thousands and thousands of times all over the country and all over the world, and that’s part of the reason why the tracing program is ultimately going to be hugely important.”

At the end of his prepared remarks on what he said was “another difficult week in managing our way through the surge,” Baker spoke about encouraging and inspiring stories he hears from people all over the state. He talked about high school seniors taking jobs at grocery stores since their last year of high school was cut short, and businesses upending their operations to contribute to the fight against COVID-19.

“We also see little glimmers of hope all around us,” he said. “And I hope that all of us will use that as part of the fuel that we all need to not only get through the surge, but get to the other side and start to think about what the next act here in Massachusetts will look like.”