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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

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Regional Approach Needed to Re-Open Local Economies ASAP

Our great state is comprised of roughly 5.8 million residents, bordered by the Mississippi River to our west, Lake Michigan and Green Bay on the east, Lake Superior to the north, and the State of Illinois to the south. There are 72 counties that cover nearly 54,000 square miles of land area and about 65,500 square miles of total area, if you count the important inland waters and the portions of Lakes Michigan and Superior – important hubs of commerce, tourism and recreation - that legally fall within state boundaries. As Wisconsinites, we share many common traits, characteristics, and likes and dislikes. However, from west to east and north to south, individuals and families also choose differing ways of life, in reference to *where* they choose to live and *how* they choose to make a living.

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, or WEDC, is our state's public-private agency that is the lead economic development arm of our state government. Did you know that they work closely with nine regional economic development partners around the state to facilitate and coordinate resources and support for local businesses? On their regional partnership website, they state, "Together, we can help you find the part of Wisconsin that offers the greatest benefit for your company and the community." ¹

The economic development regions themselves include groups of adjoining counties from different parts of the state. The groups include: Visions Northwest, Momentum West (includes Eau Claire County), 7 Rivers Alliance (includes La Crosse and Monroe County), Prosperity Southwest (includes Grant County and City of Platteville), Grow North, Centergy (includes Wood and Portage County), The Madison Regional Economic Partnership, The New North (includes Brown and Door County), and the Milwaukee 7. In turn, these groups work with local chambers of commerce and other business, civic, and governmental groups to help maintain and grow the economy of particular regions.

Why do you think these economic development regions exist? It's because different regions of our state have fundamentally different economies. Are there similarities? Absolutely, but there are numerous differences between the assortment of industries that thrive in different parts of the state based on a variety of factors, including distinct demographics, geography, natural resources, and other characteristics. Look at Western Wisconsin; there are four separate economic development regional partnerships covering the whole west side of the state because of the unique aspects of their regional economies, from Dickeyville all the way up to Superior.

I share all of that to get to the primary point I'm trying to convey. We need a local and regional approach to re-opening up our economy, and we need one as soon as possible. As I alluded to last week in a statement, the 'Badger Bounce Back Plan' that Governor Evers released unnecessarily utilizes criteria



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that's overly restrictive and goes above and beyond federal guidelines. Most importantly, the governor's plan is not one that takes into account the unique aspects of our local and regional economies. It's a one size fits all approach, and has been proven over and over on issue after issue, subjecting our local communities to the direction and whims of those from the southcentral and southeast part of the state won't do the job in the rest of the state.

In the federal guidelines for 'Opening Up America Again,' under the proposed state or regional gating criteria as it relates to systems, cases and hospitals, it specifically states, "State and local officials may need to tailor the application of these criteria to local circumstances (e.g. metropolitan areas that have suffered severe COVID outbreaks, rural and suburban areas where the outbreaks have not occurred or have been mild.) Additionally, where appropriate, Governors should work on a regional basis to satisfy these criteria and to progress through the phases outlined below." ²

As I write, according to the Wisconsin Hospital Association COVID-19 Situational Awareness website, there have been a total of 63 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 3 deaths in the entire seven county western region of the state. ³ Any loss of life is tragic, however, economic risks need to be weighed with health risks and as we know, both when it comes to mental health and otherwise, economic disparity leads to breakdowns in mental health and physical wellness. It's not good enough to essentially say that the virus can travel so we need to treat everyone the same, as the governor has stated recently.

Professionals from a wide variety of occupations are used to working in constantly changing and dynamic environments. We can adapt if conditions change. At this time, in the daily conversations I'm having with local governmental and business leaders, I'm encouraging them to work together to develop regional and local plans to safely re-open local economies as soon as practical and will continue to offer whatever assistance I can in those efforts.

Nancy VanderMeer represents the 70th Wisconsin State Assembly District, which includes portions of Monroe, Jackson, Portage and Wood counties and serves as the Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Rural Development.

¹ <https://wedc.org/programs-and-resources/regional-economic-development-partners/>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

³ <https://www.wha.org/COVID19Update> (accessed 4/29/20)