What is our “new normal?” As we weather a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, it’s a question that is on all our minds. We’re anxious to know when we’ll get back to business, back to school, back to dinners out, even back to hugs and handshakes. And we’re anxious to know what normalcy will look like “on the other side.”

For now, our “new normal” means staying home in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. For many of us, life has become monotonous. For others, social isolation and the fear of financial strain can cause despair. Yet even now, we can be grateful for the remarkable examples of leadership, resiliency, and innovation that have emerged during this crisis.

We are fortunate to have outstanding leadership at the state level from Governor Mike DeWine, who signaled early on that he was going to do everything in his power to keep Ohioans safe. Many governors across the country went on to follow his lead. Just three months into his administration, we were honored to have Gov. DeWine provide the keynote address at our Chamber’s Annual Dinner. Who could have imagined at that time the challenges ahead of us?

We are also fortunate to have world-class health care systems, hospitals and medical staff in our backyard. Few communities of our size are so lucky. While most of us are “sheltering in place,” our dedicated health care workers, first responders, and essential workers are on the front lines, 24/7. The more we stay home, the more we protect them.

We are fortunate to have Ohio businesses and organizations that are innovating and adapting on the fly. Gervasi Vineyard has temporarily converted its distillery to make hand sanitizer. P. Graham Dunn is producing 50,000 face shields a day. ArtsinStark went “virtual” for their April First Friday, and thousands of people tuned in. Countless other businesses, including our own Chamber, have moved operations to a 100% remote environment. And it’s working; maybe not perfectly, but we’re adapting.

Our “new normal” is only just beginning to evolve. Our priority - not only at the Chamber, but across the country - will be assisting in a business recovery effort unlike any we’ve seen in our lifetime. Chamber staff are in constant communication with officials in Columbus and Washington, D.C. to keep our business community engaged and apprised of daily developments, which we’re sharing online at CantonChamber.org/COVID19.

While essential businesses have stayed open, the truth is that ALL businesses are essential to keeping people employed and our economy humming. We can take comfort in knowing that our region has the necessary assets and has made the right investments to position us well in the “new normal.”

We’re a manufacturing hub. If the crisis has taught us anything, it’s that we must make sure that certain goods are both stockpiled and in adequate supply for sale to last through a disruption. We have the infrastructure and know-how to produce the goods our country and world needs.

We’re an energy hub. The Akron-Canton region sits at the gateway to the Utica and Marcellus Shale play, which is teeming with abundant, reliable, low-cost natural gas. We’re also home to the nation’s densest cluster of polymer and plastics companies. We can get polyethylene to these companies quickly and cheaply.

Perhaps our greatest asset, though, is the resiliency of our people and businesses, large and small. No one knows exactly what our “new normal” will look like, but I do know this. Our region must be adaptive, be able to assess our collective resources and strengths, and understand what role each of us must play to succeed. The “new normal” will mean thinking differently – looking across government, county and business lines to see how we can work together to restore our region to prosperity.

DENNIS P. SAUNIER
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