

The Detroit News

Andiamo owners call for compromise, but not to defy government

The group asked Michigan restaurant owners to submit their ideas for reopening dining rooms so they can take them to Lansing to discuss a compromise

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Days after owners of a Metro Detroit restaurant group sent a letter to their fellow business owners urging them to "band together and fight back" as a group after the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services temporarily paused indoor dining again, they presented a softer tone Thursday.

"I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore, and that's how I felt when I wrote that letter last week," said Joe Vicari, owner of Andiamo and Joe Muer Seafood restaurants, in a Zoom Thursday afternoon, adding that he's still mad.



He relaxed his stance, though, as he talked about compromising with Lansing.

"I don't want to disobey the government orders... it's a losing situation," he said in the call, which was initially going to be an in-person meeting at Andiamo's Warren banquet facility. Because it was expected to draw a crowd, the meeting was instead presented online Thursday as a "webinar."

"We have to figure out a way, with Lansing, with the board of health, we have to figure out a way to keep our restaurants open, safely," he said. "And if we have to compromise we'll figure out a compromise that's good for public safety and good for us to stay in business."

In his statement, Vicari explained the hardships he and his employees face by having to close their dining rooms completely or run them at half capacity for most of the year.

"I had to lay off 700 employees," he said. "We're a bigger company, we have 22 restaurants. Out of my restaurants there are probably 80 people working (right now) and over 700 sitting on the sidelines. It's devastating to me personally. I know all 700 of my employees, some better than others. I know they have families, they have children, they have obligations."



Vicari asked his fellow restaurant owners to fill out a survey about their current situation on his

website, vicarirestaurants.com/unitedmichiganrestaurantowners. He also invited Michigan business owners to ask his lawyer questions and to submit ideas for reopening on the website.

Vicari, who purchased three area restaurants this year and put his seasonal Brownie's on the Lake up for sale, said "we're all in this together."

He said he was convinced by his lawyers, who also spoke on the Zoom call Thursday afternoon along with his wife Rosalie Vicari, that defying the order and opening dining rooms is "not the right solution."

"I'm hurting, big time, but at the end of the day I'm telling my fellow restaurateurs not to go against the ordinance because you're going to get shut down, it's going to cost a lot more money than you want it to cost," he said.

Financial consultant and turnaround advisor Patrick O'Keefe told The Detroit News it's good that these restaurants are banning together and going to the government directly.

"I think that strategically, the Michigan Restaurant and Lodging Association may be the wrong advocacy group to promote this because of their tumultuous relationship with the Governor," he said. "Maybe it's good that a few of these owners are standing up on their own and trying to have their voice heard."

This week the MRLA, along with two restaurant groups, lost a court battle to have the temporary order halted. Also this week, the Michigan Liquor Control Commission suspended the liquor license of three more Michigan restaurants for defying the order.

O'Keefe, who is founder and CEO of O'Keefe consulting firm in Bloomfield Hills, said that even if there is a bailout from the state or federal government for restaurants, the \$100 million figure that Whitmer has mentioned is not enough.

"She keeps touting this \$100 million bailout like it's some magic bullet here," he said, adding that if the Michigan Restaurant and Lodging Association figures are correct, there are at least 300,000 restaurant workers laid off or furloughed with dining rooms closed.

"That \$100 million wouldn't provide much more than \$300 to every worker in the restaurant business that's laid off. Three hundred bucks, that's it," he said. "And is only that industry. It's not earmarked for the restaurant industry, it's for all workers that are impacted. So, \$100 million... it's nothing."

He said a more realistic bailout is closer to \$1 billion, but that Whitmer can't obtain that number. Earlier this week, however, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell shot down a bipartisan \$908 billion stimulus plan and countered a roughly \$500 billion plan.

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