

Rahm Emanuel: Forget right to work. Create a right to thrive.

By Rahm Emanuel

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Gov. Bruce Rauner appears to think that union busting is the path to economic growth for Illinois. His right-to-work empowerment zone proposal, which would cut off funding for unions negotiating on behalf of workers, will only create a race to the bottom in wages and benefits that will hurt working families across the state. The governor's plan is wrong for Illinois and wrong for Chicago.

In my neighborhood economic development policy speech earlier this year, I offered a better way: a Right-to-Thrive zone concept that provides a mix of positive incentives that will create neighborhood economic development and jobs — all while lifting workers up and supporting their hard-fought gains. These thrive zones will build on the work already begun within the neighborhood strategy of our "Plan for Economic Growth and Jobs," and will be a centerpiece of my second-term economic development plan.

Here's how they work.

Thrive zones would be created in the city's most economically depressed neighborhoods. The goal is to provide businesses with an array of incentives and reduce red tape to invest in neighborhoods that for too long have suffered from underinvestment.

First, we will work with the county and state to make these thrive zones tax-free. Businesses that set up shop in these zones will be exempt from property, income and sales taxes for a period of time as long as they create jobs in the surrounding neighborhood. This would not be a handout. Businesses that open in these hard-hit neighborhoods would be able to keep more of the taxes they generate to invest in jobs.

Second, we will establish a concierge service for businesses opening in thrive zones to help the owners navigate the city's zoning, permits and licensing processes. This service will ensure that the businesses are able to get off the ground without getting trapped in a bureaucratic maze. We've already slashed business license types by 60 percent and cut the wait time for a Chicago business license in half. This new concierge service will have specific expertise regarding the specifics of each zone.

Third, we will connect businesses to resources to help them grow. We will help train workers for businesses that open in these zones through job-placement programs run by the City Colleges of Chicago, Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership and Skills for Chicagoland's Future. Incentives will prioritize the hiring of the long-term unemployed and the formerly incarcerated. We will help businesses starting up in thrive zones with export, marketing and financial assistance to support physical expansion and remodeling.

Next, instead of gutting protections for workers, our thrive zones will ensure that labor has a seat at the table. Just as my administration worked with labor to streamline work rules at McCormick Place to make it easier to operate a convention or trade show in Chicago, we will work as partners with labor unions to ensure that the zones provide businesses with incentives without undermining important worker protections.

Finally, we will create an investment fund to support new businesses in these zones. To help pay for this, we will review the tax-incentive financing program, planned manufacturing districts and the small business improvement fund to identify reforms that could produce dedicated resources for use in thrive zones.

Improving the business climate is a prerequisite for revitalizing our neighborhoods, but we cannot create jobs at the expense of working families. Instead of hanging his hat on right-to-work zones, Gov. Rauner should focus on eliminating the barriers to entrepreneurship and creating new incentives for businesses to operate in struggling neighborhoods. My thrive-zone proposal accomplishes these goals without undermining the protections that labor unions have earned after decades of fighting.

Rahm Emanuel is mayor of Chicago.

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