

OPINION

the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘It’s a very difficult proposition’

President Donald Trump and Gov. Kate Brown have outlined frameworks for reopening the economy during the coronavirus pandemic.

With the number of cases of the virus still low on the North Coast, business owners have suffered more from government restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19 than the disease itself.

Businesses will likely be in survival mode for the next year to 18 months.



DERRICK DePLEDGE

Beyond cash flow, staffing and supply challenges, many will have to navigate how to market the region again after North Coast leaders implored tourists to stay away.

“It’s a very difficult proposition,” said David Reid, the executive

director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce. “I think the message was: ‘Stay away for now. We’re not ready.’ I don’t know how it was heard.

“So, you’re right, we have to sort of back that back out and say, again, right now, the message is: ‘Not yet.’ Not, ‘Don’t come.’”

Reid, a former insurance agent for Aflac in Astoria, took over the chamber in 2018.

In an interview, Reid discussed the top concerns business owners have with the coronavirus, the government restrictions on lodging, the region’s dependence on tourism and the chamber’s advice on how to survive the pandemic.

Q: The chamber asked business owners their top concerns regarding the coronavirus in a survey. What were the dominant themes that you heard?

A: The long-term impacts on the global economy. And the limits on their operations, both immediate and long term.

Q: On that weekend in March when we saw a bump in spring break visitors, local governments quickly enacted sweeping emergency restrictions on the lodging industry. In hindsight, do you wish they were rolled out in a more deliberative way that included the voices of business?

A: Given how it evolved, I think it went well. I think it was handled as expeditiously as it could be.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

David Reid is the executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce.

I did not get pushback from too many lodging establishments.

Q: Would you have liked to have had more of a say in how that went, because a lot of this happened on the weekend?

A: I did have a say in what happened. Again, I have no complaints about how it happened.

I’m sad that it had to happen.

Q: The message, from the Astoria mayor on down, was: “Stay away.” How do you go about unringing that bell from a marketing perspective?

A: It’s a very difficult proposition. I think the message was: ‘Stay away for now. We’re not ready.’ I don’t know how it was heard.

So, you’re right, we have to sort of back that back out and say, again, right now, the message is: ‘Not yet.’ Not, ‘Don’t come.’ It’s, ‘Not yet.’

Later it will be: ‘Check with us before you come.’

We are working on methods of determining how open we are, so what capacity we have in hotels, what capacity we have in restaurants, what capacity we have in attractions. So that people can make their plans before they arrive here as to where they go, how they spend their time.

So, A) they’re not disappointed when they get here and find that there’s not capacity for them; and B) that our local citizens are not overrun with people that

we’re not able to handle.

Q: It seems like a different challenge for us on the North Coast. If you’re in Eastern Oregon and you say, “OK, we’re open.” It may not lead to a flood of visitors. If we say, “We’re open.” We’re likely to see a surge.

A: If this is not opened statewide at one time, it will be interesting to see what happens to the first county that opens, or the first community that opens. Does everybody have pent up, ‘I’ve got to travel. I don’t care where I go. I’ve just got to go?’

Will they see an out-of-balance reaction?

Q: The pandemic has shown how much the North Coast’s economy depends on tourism. We also see some of the resentment locals have toward aspects of the tourism industry. How will the chamber approach this divide going forward?

A: We honestly need to accept as a community that the things that we love about our community are, in part, paid for with outside money.

What you see right now, when we’re all sequestered in place — what you see is what we can support.

We have a limited number of restaurants, limited menus, we have fewer people working in those restaurants, because that’s what we can support as a town of 10,000 people, 15,000 including

Warrenton.

What we need to understand is that all those lovely restaurants that we like, all the attractions, all the things that we enjoy here as locals, are, in part, paid for with outside money.

It’s a traded-sector product for us, is tourism. So, some accepting of tourism.

And there’s a responsibility on the other side, too, of visitors to our area, to not treat it like Portland’s playground.

Q: There’s been talk in Astoria over the past few years about the need to diversify the economy. Will that be part of the discussion?

A: Yes. And it always has been. It’s always been a goal here.

We added tourism in to diversify our economy.

I think Astoria and Warrenton have been far more successful than most coastal communities in creating a diverse economy.

We’re still a rural community and there’s only so much we’re going to be able to do. The idea that we would have huge manufacturing here, that we would have high-tech here, is not realistic in the short term.

It’s something we’ll have to build over time.

Q: What’s the chamber’s best advice to business owners wondering how to survive the coronavirus?

A: So that’s the key, I think, right now, is survival.

So whatever creative ideas you can get to stay engaged with your customers, stay engaged with your customer base, to provide them with some way of doing business with you if at all possible.

But these changes that people are making right now to survive this pandemic are, in many cases, not supportive of other business models going forward. They’re not enough to support the business. It’s not like they’re going to change into these things, but they can remain part of their offering.

So as restaurants get better at doing takeout, if that’s something they’ve done before, maybe it remains part of their business. But the idea that they’ll remain as exclusively takeout and still be able to support the staff and the overhead is not realistic.

So it’s a question of taking the most that you can of this time and then taking what pieces of it work into the future.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rebuilding

I think it’s one of the great ironies of history that the countries of Europe and Asia after World War II had the “opportunity” to rebuild their economies and institutions, regardless of whether they’d been on the winning or losing side.

They had no choice but to do so because their industrial bases, education, health care and other institutions and systems — not to mention their cities and farms and very lives — were in shambles. But having to do so gave them the chance to rethink and redesign them all, to varying extents, based on the common interests of citizens.

While we victors, who had no severe war on our soil, except in Hawaii and the Aleutians and a few incursions, went right on with a health care system that had grown from amateurs selling snake oil and sawing bones on the street into big business; and education and industrial systems dominated by dog-eat-dog capitalism, lying, cheating and stealing.

I was born during that war, and I love this country as much as you do. But we’ve earned the Great Satan title we wear in the eyes of much of the world. For proof, there’s Donald Trump, our president, and all his disgusting minions. Maybe, I hope, in another historical irony, we can rethink and improve in the rebuilding many of the features of our society that this pandemic is now halting in their tracks.

JOSEPH WEBB
Astoria

Relieved

I was relieved last week when President Donald Trump’s staff slipped him the Constitution.

MARY TANGUAY WEBB
Astoria

Soul food

What can I do? The strongest thing I can do is to keep doing what I love. Because it has its own power source. I

love to express what I witness: the body language of a blue jay on the bird feeder, the neighbor cat rolling in the grass, welcoming the attention of a hesitant but curious fawn. A friend’s naked laughter and good smiles when we all know she has lost her business.

Seeing every story in the paper distilled to percentage points and monetary losses — how distant that keeps us from each other. I offer the thought that statistics are the real social distancing at this time, and in this culture.

Every corporation, speaking with its mouth full in website ads and mailers: “We’re here to help.” A robot call. A mass mailing. A do-not-reply email.

So if you need to dance and can’t find a partner, you could dance alone or call your friends and dance together — separately. Or sing. Or knit. Social distancing is not social ignoring. We still have clocks and phones and my, oh, my does Astoria have networks. Use each other.

KMUN is working hard to do remote local programs, the food banks need supplying, your neighbor needs a bag of cat food. The for-profit corporations are stuffing their mouths with our lives.

But real food is soul food. Treat yourselves to the meal of your lives. And, try to find a copy of the book “The Cellist of Sarajevo.” We have music to make!

MARY LOU MCAULEY
Astoria

Suitable location?

The last voyage of the remaining ferry-boat that served in the Astoria-Megler ferry service is drawing near. Where is a suitable location for its final resting place?

I imagine the Tourist No. 2 could pay for its keep even more handily out of the water than it could in the water. Upkeep costs would be negligible, compared to the never-ending expenses related to moorage fees.

Hauling it out at the Astoria Marine Construction Co. seems a viable solution. This fabled shipyard may have the capability to at least set the boat on blocks.



Where there is a will, there is a way, and this arrangement might turn into a lucrative tourist attraction if, for instance, the Columbia River Maritime Museum were to become involved. The AMCO shipyard itself is a time-capsule maritime institution, and a potential maritime museum annex. All it takes is money.

Failing all this, we might as well disembowel the old boat and scuttle it on Taylor Sands. It wouldn’t be the first time it had been run aground, and its rotting hulk would make a nice visual for North Slope residences, plus becoming an ideal rookery for nesting cormorants.

GARY DURHEIM
Seaside

Politics versus reality

We have all seen how political goals motivate some people to create false narratives to bolster their party’s stature. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp’s statement on March 31 claiming they just realized the coronavirus could be spread by asymptomatic carriers is ludicrous.

Outrageously absurd! Is this the new political discourse in our country? Remember Kemp is mimicking President Donald Trump, who has acted simi-

larly from day one. Trump doesn’t realize everything he says publicly is documented, and yet he stupidly denies having said them when they’re on film. Apparently he is encouraged by a percentage of the American people who have drunk the Kool-Aid and mindlessly accept the endless lies, excuses and blame Trump heaps on those who seek truth.

Trump thinks people are ignorant, scared little children who need to be patronized with lies to calm and distract them. Trump claimed they had the coronavirus under control, and not to worry. His misinformation and denials delayed this country into disaster.

Kemp is one example of the Republican way of insisting the listener believe their lies in order to stay a loyal Republican. Some extreme Trumpers are making death threats against Dr. Anthony Fauci, because he says things that contradict Trump.

Is this the true nature of the Republican Party? Attack and destroy anyone who dares to point out the party line is not in line with reality? Reality, like the virus, is oblivious to political parties. Only by demanding the truth can we be set free to effectively cope with reality.

BRENTON KAHLE
Astoria