

OPINION

the Astorian

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BEHIND THE NEWS

‘I don’t want to be shut down again’

Escape Lodging, known for properties like The Ocean Lodge and the Inn at Cannon Beach, usually markets the cozy, beach town getaway experience.

But during the coronavirus pandemic, Patrick Nofield, the company’s president, is eager to share a different kind of feedback from guests:

“Clean, comfortable and had great parameters for dealing with COVID-19.”

“We came during the crazy times of COVID and they were very accommodating and safe.”

“We noticed a lot of cleaning going on and could overhear training of employees for cleaning — very impressive.”

“That is a motivator for me right now,” Nofield said of the safety protocols against the virus since Cannon Beach lifted a ban on visitors in May. “I don’t want to be shut down again.”



DERRICK DePLEDGE

A surge of virus cases across Oregon raises the potential for another round of travel restrictions that could undo the progress the lodging industry has made over the past several weeks to salvage a share of peak summer revenue.

Gov. Kate Brown suggested she might limit tourism from states that are virus hot spots. Bend reissued a travel advisory discouraging tourism through Labor Day and is looking at new regulations on lodging.

Escape Lodging, based in Cannon Beach, develops and manages several small-to-medium sized hotels, as well as restaurants.

In an interview, Nofield discussed the marketing challenges, the government’s response to the pandemic and the lodging industry’s emphasis on health and safety.

Q: One of the most memorable images during the coronavirus pandemic so far on the North Coast was that sign outside of Cannon Beach that said “closed to visitors.” From a marketing standpoint, how do you rebound from that?

A: You know, I think that was a concern for sure.

Worse than that, the Cannon Beach Gazette came out with a headline during that first week prior to the shutdown saying that COVID-19 closes down Cannon Beach. And it was like inferred that



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Patrick Nofield is the president of Escape Lodging in Cannon Beach.

we had a COVID case, which, as a hotel, you’re like, we don’t want that.

So I think the city probably reacted, and they really probably didn’t consider the response from our demographic, from our customer.

But I think it was the right thing to do. I mean, we were actually considering closing two of our hotels in Cannon Beach down, plus our two Seaside properties, that same weekend, because we were losing reservations at a record clip. People were canceling, and we needed to understand how to get ahold of this thing.

My concern with closing down Cannon Beach like they did is there wasn’t really any plan for reopening. And that was, you know, 10 weeks being shut down is tough. We have no revenue coming in. We still have our debt. We still have expenses that are fixed. We furloughed 400 employees.

It was a mess.

Q: What do you think the government — local, state and federal — could have done differently in response to the pandemic?

A: I think creating a dialogue with the industry would have been very helpful.

And I think at the state level, Gov. Brown’s office was doing that with our trade association — the Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association.

And I do think, you know, like the city

manager would reach out to me and talk to me about what we were doing.

But, collectively, I didn’t feel like we were doing that. And, really, we’re in partnership with our local government. We have to be.

In fact, on top of that, they only missed out on almost a million dollars in the second quarter in transient lodging tax for the city. So I think they see that or realize the impact it has on their local budgets.

Q: What can the government do now to help the lodging industry recover?

A: Boy, that’s tough. We need a vaccine or a treatment.

I’ve got businesses inland that are business-travel dependent, and they’re still about 35% below where we were last year.

But I do think maintaining the dialogue, not reacting ... have that dialogue, but let’s talk about the safe practices that we’re executing.

Our concern is for our guests. Our concern is for our employees. And our concern is for the community.

Q: Lodging industry leaders have urged Congress to provide a limited “safe harbor” from liability exposure related to the virus when safety protocols are followed. How concerned are you about the liability issue?

A: I think everybody is concerned.

The problem is, how do you determine where somebody received the virus,

where they got it? How do you really do that?

Everything we’re doing locally — best practices for cleaning. We actually have a health officer in every property that all they do is manage our supply, manage the public cleaning. Somebody is out there all the time in high-touch areas wiping stuff down.

And it’s kind of been the focus right now on what we’re doing.

Q: How has your messaging changed to attract visitors?

A: We are focusing on messaging safety protocols for our guests.

In fact, our social media outreach for Instagram, Facebook has been just that. Our social media manager this last week was going around taking video of our housekeepers cleaning.

... We want people to respond saying, ‘I felt safe when I was at your property.’ ‘You had your protocols in place.’

We’ve kind of compromised a little bit on the hospitality side. We’re not doing daily housekeeping service unless it’s requested. Our breakfasts are grab-and-go. We’re not doing the traditional hot food buffet.

So the amenities that we offer are somewhat restricted, but, again, the priority is the safe protocols for our guests and our employees.

Q: We have seen some backlash against tourism from locals during the pandemic. Do tourism leaders need to do a better job of explaining the economic value to the North Coast?

A: You know, I think we try to do that.

But I think about myself as a person that would be elderly or compromised, and, you see all these people coming to town, I don’t think you’d give a hoot about the economy. You’re thinking about self-preservation first. And you’re scared.

So, again, what we have to do is manage it. And I don’t know anybody who can figure that out.

Q: What guidance do you have for others in the lodging industry?

A: Focus on best practices for cleaning and sanitizing your hotels.

My concern is we have one person get sick that works for us, before you know it, we could potentially be shut down if we don’t manage it.

And I don’t want to go through that again — another 10 weeks of no income.

Derrick DePledge is editor of The Astorian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Beacon in the dark

I first wanted to welcome our new superintendent, William Fritz, and our new elementary school principal, Tammy McMullen, to the Knappa School District. I’ve been fortunate to spend the last few days getting to know them, and am impressed by their efforts and investment in our children’s future thus far.

Traditionally, summer is for rest and rejuvenation within school district employees, yet they, and many volunteers, have been working tirelessly during summer break to make sure that our students have the best chance for educational success during this trying time.

Secondly, our Knappa Schools Foundation has jumped in to improve our district children’s opportunities and future educational success for our upcoming year of “COVID learning.” The foundation just committed to help us get more Chromebooks, so each child in the district is served.

Additionally, they helped purchase See-saw, an online platform for the primary grade students that is more user friendly for the little ones than Google Classroom. Also, they assisted in the expansion of IXL, our online math platform.

Overall, our school district and community has risen together for the good of all.

Lastly, I would like to personally thank all of our kind donors and delivery personnel of our Knappa Community Helping Hands group. Without your donations of time and funds, and the generosity of the Clatsop Community Action Regional Food Bank, our food program wouldn’t exist.

As a community, we support and love one another. My family is blessed to live here.

COURTNEY BANGS
Astoria

Angels

One of Astoria’s greatest assets has to be Columbia Memorial Hospital. It is fantastic. Despite my terrible outcome, leading to a really bad day, I found everyone to be kind, caring, smart, efficient and

compassionate. I hadn’t been to a hospital in 25 years. I love this place.

Most of us have jobs where we take care of people. Nurses take care of the person. They are revered for a reason. So please wear a face mask. These angels are the ones who will have to bear the brunt of stupidity some people are still proud to display.

I hate to read the stories about labor problems at the hospital. It’s impossible for a business that charges absurd, borderline criminal charges to not make money. Pay the nurses, protect their jobs, give them the best benefits. There’s no reason not to shave profits — even go to breakeven to take care of all these amazing folks.

One of the things I will remember most is the reassuring pats on the back as I was trying to come to grips with the bad news. The power of touch is priceless. Nurses answer their calling because they know all this instinctively. They are the best among us.

I saw them that morning trudge to work like we all do. The only difference is once inside, it’s all magic. So thanks. And again, wear those face masks everywhere.

JAMES SPURR
Cannon Beach

Deny extension

The four-story Fairfield Inn and Suites is planned to be built along the Astoria Riverwalk at Second Street, but that could change if enough of us let each member of the Astoria City Council know this massive structure doesn’t conform to the Bridge Vista Overlay.

They need the entire parking lots of Stephanie’s Cabin and The Ship Inn, as well as areas currently used by Josephson’s Smokehouse.

The hotel developer pushed through the hotel with less than six months before the Bridge Vista Overlay’s first vote, so it was not held to the 35-foot height standards of the Bridge Vista Overlay, and has done little since to move it forward.

Our City Council has a chance to take the first steps on Aug. 6 at 6 p.m. to require this massive project to meet the Bridge Vista Overlay’s standards on



height and mass. They need to support our city’s community development director Megan Leatherman’s decision to deny the hotel’s extension on design and site review permits.

Since this is a land use issue, we are discouraged in contacting the City Council directly, but the public notice said we could send emails for council members by way of the city planner, Barbara Fryer (bfryer@astoria.or.us). It is best to send your email by Wednesday, so it will be included with the staff report — but anytime before Aug. 6 is good.

GEORGE “MICK” HAGUE
Astoria

Style of dim

This is an open thank-you letter to Dr. Anthony Fauci: Thank you, thank you, thank you! We appreciate your work. Hear this over the din of this administration, and its own style of dim.

“Din, Dim, Done!”

JOANNE BROWN
Astoria

Encouraging

I would like to congratulate The Astorian on the latest articles printed, such as Ashley Inniss training wild mustangs and the Boardman coal plant being decommissioned. I would encourage everyone to advertise your paper or subscribe online or the printed version.

I also note the kind words you had for previous Republican governors and their contribution to Oregon society, and the nation as a whole — gentlemen such as Mark O. Hatfield and Tom McCall.

I would also encourage people to watch Ken Burns production of “Country Music” on Oregon Public Broadcasting. The research to produce this masterpiece must have taken years.

Years earlier, he came out with “The Civil War.” In my opinion, in that production the movement was too slow and the music too sad. He has improved greatly, and has the genius for being a good storyteller.

Keep up the good work.

TERRY J. SMITH
Warrenton