

Hotels: Boost began in March

Continued from Page A1

hurt. A recent report from American Hotel and Lodging Association found that 21 of the top 25 hotel markets are in a depression or recession cycle, and revenue per available room in urban hotel markets is down 52% from May 2019 to this May.

In contrast, resort locations like coastal Oregon are one of the few areas where the hotel industry has started to stabilize and recover. The revenue per available room was down just 1% from May 2019 to this May.

Recovery

“Our market is leisure travel. There is a little bit of business travel here, but it’s mostly leisure,” Nelson said. “Leisure travel is what’s driving everything as far as travel (right now). People are not traveling for work. Heck, they aren’t even leaving their house for work.”

Several local hoteliers say the boost of visitors to Astoria this year began in March, about two months earlier than the traditional peak season for tourists.

Atomic Motel manager Katie Richard said her 29-room motel has been “almost full every day since March,” while Rose River Inn owner Pam Armstrong reported her bed-and-breakfast’s “best April in 16 years.”

The Cannery Pier Hotel & Spa has consistently finished above its 2019 numbers throughout the spring and summer season, said general manager Linh DePledge.

“I think you’ll see that in other places, too. I’ve talked to different general managers around the coastal area, and we are all experiencing the same thing,” DePledge said.

Her expectations for a busy summer season keeps DePledge vigilant about staffing. Right now, her summer staff includes 20 employees, compared to the usually 25 summer workers. That’s enough to run the hotel at full capacity, but it leaves little wiggle room for unexpected sick days or managing burnout, she said. So finding staff is a “big concern” for her — and one of the biggest challenges in the industry.

“Obviously, a lot of hotels have hiring shortages right now. It’s difficult to find people to work,” Astley said. “We have heard of a lot of hotels that can’t open 100%” because of staffing.

State employment reports show that employment in Clatsop County’s accommodation sector dropped from about 1,590 people in June 2019 to just 670 in June 2020. Accommodation employment has begun to rebound in the county, with 1,330 people employed in May, but it still trails pre-pandemic numbers by hundreds of workers.

Astley said the staffing shortage is driven by a

“combination of things,” including a federal boost to unemployment benefits, lack of workforce housing and lack of access to affordable child care.

To attract and retain employees, many hotels have started offering pay raises or bonuses. DePledge offers a temporary wage increase during summer months. It’s a practice she used even before the pandemic, though this year the increase is higher than usual.

“We’ve always paid above living wage, but we are actually taking it one step more during this very unusual time when it comes to employment on the coast,” DePledge said. “We are giving employees \$2 an hour above their hire wage for now until after Labor Day.”

Incentives

Richard said her seasonal housekeeping staff includes several workers who have worked with Atomic Motel for multiple years. Most of those employees returned this year, and she’s filled the necessary positions to keep the motel running by offering a competitive wage comparable to other motels on the coast.

“Basically I’ve been able to be staffed, but barely. And I know we are one of the lucky ones,” Richard said. “I’ve heard of other hotels that can’t reach full occupancy because they don’t have the housekeeping staff.”

Nelson, from the Hotel Elliott, said he tries to avoid raising wages just to compete, because it can be financially unstable. Instead, he guarantees his employees a certain number of hours, so they’ll know exactly how much they can make, even in the off-season. He also offers a bonus to any current employee who is still working with the hotel in October.

“If I had to hire someone right now, it would be very hard, I’m sure. ... But at this point, we are still OK, and I think we are going to be OK,” Nelson said. “We haven’t gotten to the point where we’ve cut services because of labor. We are bringing our services back, actually.”

That includes reopening the wine bar and working on plans to restart a hot breakfast program, two services that stopped due to health and safety restrictions during the pandemic.

Nelson hopes that restoring some of Hotel Elliott’s more unique features will keep the hotel competitive with larger, branded franchises, especially as Astoria prepares for what he expects to be one of its busiest summers yet.

“We are going to break a record for July,” Nelson said. “And we’ve broken records the last five months. ... We are still not making up for last year in what we didn’t make, but we are definitely on the rebound in a very big way.”

Nonprofit: ‘We’re going to open this thing slowly’

Continued from Page A1

services out of the center, as well as provide links to other social service resources. The center will not provide overnight accommodations.

“We’re going to open this thing slowly,” Orak told the city’s homelessness solutions task force at a meeting Thursday. “We don’t want to just jump into it and say, ‘Oh, wait, we should have done this.’”

He said he wants to get feedback from the task force, which includes representatives from a variety of social services agencies and homelessness advocacy programs in Clatsop County.

As part of the move to a building, Filling Empty Bellies will restructure as LiFE Boat Services. Beacon Clubhouse will have its own separate area in the building, but will be considered a program of LiFE Boat Services.

Filling Empty Bellies and



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Osarch Orak with Filling Empty Bellies helped provide nearly 100 to-go meals at Thanksgiving.

Beacon Clubhouse work with people at very different stages of navigating social services, getting into housing and addressing mental health issues, but they complement each other, Orak said.

A daytime drop-in center had long been a goal for

Filling Empty Bellies. The nonprofit, under the leadership of Orak’s partner, Erin Carlsen, spent a year trying to get a building for such a facility in 2018, but faced several setbacks.

Carlsen now runs the Beacon Clubhouse. Orak took

up the task of running Filling Empty Bellies and searching for a building last year. He said he was rejected a number of times by building owners because of the homeless clientele Filling Empty Bellies serves.

The drop-in center — also referred to as a navigation center — is an important milestone, Orak said.

“Finally, all of this is happening,” he told The Astorian. “All the hard work that Erin and (Filling Empty Bellies founder) Corri Buck and all of us have done. It’s coming to fruition.”

Advocates in the community have spoken over the years about the need for a low-barrier drop-in center, saying it is important for people who are homeless to have a place to go and get basic needs met where they can also be put in touch with social, housing and mental health services.

Food tax: ‘We cannot afford to not do this’

Continued from Page A1

against, saying it would lead to even more division in the community around an already contentious issue.

The city is still considering a ballot measure.

The new tax could raise an estimated \$1.7 million a year. The revenue would be divided between the city and the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District, giving each about \$863,000 per year.

A consultant the city partnered with estimated that 96% of the tax revenue would be generated from purchases by nonresidents.

Oregon is known for its lack of a statewide sales tax, but several cities have already implemented local food and beverage taxes or, like Cannon Beach, have considered it. Yachats, farther down the coast, and Ashland, near the California border — both cities that see significant tourism — have levied food and beverage taxes for years, using the revenue collected to fund infrastructure needs.

Proponents say the tax in Cannon Beach is necessary to fund operations at the fire district. The district is fielding ever-increasing calls for service that spike during the busy summer tourist season. The city hopes to use its share of the revenue to replace an aging City Hall and police department and secure funding for future infrastructure needs.

City leaders and Fire Chief Marc Reckmann have argued a prepared food tax is a way to spread the burden of paying for the fire district and other infrastructure fairly between visitors and residents.

The proposed tax has drawn the ire of restaurant owners who worry about negative impacts on their businesses and the cost of implementing the tax.

While they support the fire district, they say they are still reeling from a year under ever-shifting coronavirus restrictions. Some noted that they would have to invest in

A CONSULTANT THE CITY PARTNERED WITH ESTIMATED THAT 96% OF THE TAX REVENUE WOULD BE GENERATED FROM PURCHASES BY NONRESIDENTS.

new point-of-sale systems in order to calculate the tax.

“The single industry that has been hurt most by this pandemic is the restaurant industry,” wrote Jim Oyala, the owner of Bill’s Tavern & Brewhouse, in a comment he sent to the city.

Hotels and shops returned to business as usual much earlier than restaurants, which are only slowly getting back to full capacity, he said.

“This tax would be kicking a dog that is already down,” Oyala wrote.

Cindy Beckman, with

Ecola Seafoods, agreed. She supports the fire district — in 2018 Ecola Seafoods would have burned to the ground if the fire district hadn’t responded — but the tax could be a burden, she said.

Restaurants operate on thin margins, she told the City Council. The labor force is limited and implementing a tax would cost the business not just hard dollars, she said, “It’s a huge bill on our time.”

She asked that the city provide some relief to businesses to help them recoup their costs if the tax is implemented.

However, others in the community say the money needs to come from somewhere and they’d prefer visitors shoulder their share of the cost. The tax is a pass-through for businesses, they said.

“I have a choice about whether I want to go out and eat and pay a prepared food tax,” resident Betsy Ayres told the City Council. “If we decided to go ahead and fund these services though an increase in property taxes, I won’t have a choice about that. I will just have to pay that.”

“We cannot afford to not do this,” she added. “Let’s get it done.”

Darryl Komesu noted that some of the businesses opposed to the tax received grants from the city last year for pandemic relief.

Now the city has a need, he said.

Trolley: Conductors must be recertified

Continued from Page A1

Kemp said that earlier in the pandemic, the committee had discussed a conditional route that would run from Uniontown to the Columbia River Maritime Museum and back, as opposed to all the way to 39th Street.

This idea frustrated many of the volunteers, who only wanted to continue service if they could operate as normal. Now that coronavirus conditions have improved, however, Kemp said the conditional route can be scrapped.

Before service can begin, however, the committee must

work to recertify all of the conductors with the approval of the Oregon Department of Transportation, a process similar to a driving test that all operators must go through every year.

“We usually do that in March, and of course that didn’t happen this year,” Kemp said.

The trolley is classified as a form of public transportation. Due to the classification, riders can expect to have to wear masks per federal requirements.

“We’re goodwill ambassadors for the city,” Miller said. “We tell stories and jokes and have fun with people and we don’t want to be the mask police.”

Kemp said that state

inspectors will reevaluate the classification as part of their inspection prior to the trolley’s restart. They are hopeful that the requirements can be dropped as federal rules are updated sometime in September.

Another roadblock trolley operators may face is how they handle the distribution of cash payments. In the past, locals may recall waving a dollar bill to get the attention of drivers. Now, riders will make optional payments in a donation box to help keep volunteers safe.

Kemp doesn’t believe this change will hinder their ability to gather funds. “We’ve done that before and made enough money doing that,” he said.

DEL'S O.K. TIRE

point S

TIRE and AUTO SERVICE

Del Thompson, former owner of
OK Rubber Welders.

Klyde Thompson, current owner
Mike Barnett, manager

YOUR #1 SOURCE FOR TIRES

CUSTOM WHEELS AUTOMOTIVE SERVICES

Over 72 years of the Thompson family putting you first!

(503) 325-2861
35359 Business 101, Astoria
MON - FRI 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM
SAT 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM
pointstire.com/astoria