

Bend sees labor shortage as tourism heats up

By JONI AUDEN LAND
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Summers have rarely been busier for Brian Sykes, who co-owns Ouzel Outfitters, a whitewater rafting company in Bend.

He has plenty of customers, but not enough guides to lead them.

The problem started last summer, as COVID-19 restrictions eased, spurring interest in outdoor tourism. Sykes found it difficult to find qualified guides for his trips, especially those with the experience to lead more advanced routes.

“We weren’t geared up necessarily to handle the amount of business,” Sykes said. “We dealt with that simply by limiting what we were able to offer.”

Sykes said some of his trips are sold out for the rest of June and July, and he’s not able to accommodate as many customers as in years past.

Outdoor outfitters, hotels and restaurants across Bend are struggling to find and retain employees in a region heavily reliant on tourism to fund its local economy. This means a reduction in services and potentially longer wait times for consumers.

For workers, the industry’s labor crunch has led to higher wages, signing bonuses and other perks to lure employees to a sector that typically ranks among the lowest paying in the nation.

One of central Oregon’s largest employers, Mount Bachelor, has been recruiting teens as young as 14 for some positions, and throwing in winter passes to ski and snowboard.

Sykes said he raised the starting pay for his river guides by 20% and offers free training. While that has filled some gaps, he remains understaffed by several positions, and there’s no guarantee that the people he trains will stick around for a full season.

For some businesses, the promise of higher pay hasn’t been enough incentive to offset the high cost of living in Bend.

Jordan Lewis, a bartender at J-DUB in the city’s downtown, said it’s hard to survive on service industry wages.

“Bend is really expensive,” Lewis said. “Most of us work off of minimum wage and tips, and most of us at this restaurant live with roommates.”

She said J-DUB needs more employees to manage the summer crowds, and being short-staffed is stressful.

“If there’s people wanting time off throughout the summer, even if it’s just a day or two, it can make things really strenuous on the schedule and the staff



Joni Auden Land/Oregon Public Broadcasting
Bartender Jordan Lewis mixes drinks at J-DUB Bar in Bend. Her workplace, like others, has struggled to find enough employees to meet the summer demand.

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that we have,” Lewis said.

For the thousands of people expected to visit central Oregon this summer, fewer workers means longer wait times for restaurants, and needing to book tours and hotels months in advance, according to state economist Damon Runberg.

“We’re sort of on the leading edge of some of the tough trends,” Runberg said.

There were 11 million job openings nationwide in April, a 22% increase compared to last year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Bend’s labor problems are compounded by being a tourist destination

with a severe lack of affordable housing. Wage gains are often offset by a growing cost of living, Runberg said.

And tourism is critical not only to many local businesses, but also to local government services. Bend is expecting to collect more than \$14 million in taxes on short-term lodging, a 40% increase compared to 2019.

More than a third of the city’s lodging tax collections go toward marketing the region as a tourism destination through a publicly funded agency, Visit Bend.

The agency is in the process of hiring a workforce development director who will lead efforts to grow the number of

central Oregon’s tourism workers.

One of the director’s main duties will be going to local high schools and community colleges, trying to generate interest among young people in a career in hospitality.

Visit Bend CEO Kevney Dugan said private companies in the industry have historically done little to lure prospective employees.

“I think this industry has done a lackluster job recruiting people to see this industry as a desirable place to learn service skills,” Dugan said.

“This is not a short-term situation — we have to be thinking long-term about what, in five to 10 years, our labor pool looks like.”

Dugan said he does not expect immediate relief this summer, but hopes that eventually, businesses will reap the benefits of a larger labor force.

In the meantime, he encouraged visitors to be patient and considerate toward employees, who are being asked to cover more responsibilities with less support.

“I can’t say ‘patience’ enough,” Dugan said. “Be ready to bring your best self in.”

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