

Solutions from AI

they can to reconfigure their entire business model without support to meet mandated changes. They've got rent, utilities, employees, and other overhead. They cannot wait any longer ..."

Some Cottage Grove businesses opted to shut their doors as adhering strictly to take-out and delivery models prevented many from making ends meet.

Now in February, a period known as a financial slump for downtown businesses, community leaders continue to search for solutions.

The strain of the pandemic restrictions has even steered a nearby chamber of commerce into an existential crisis.

Last Friday (Feb. 12), the Creswell Chamber of Commerce sent a letter to its members announcing the chamber is facing the possibility of disbanding by the end of March, prompted by a failure to meet its board of director personnel requirements.

The chamber's office has been closed since April 1 last year.

"This past year many of our board members have stepped away," read the letter. "The Creswell Chamber of Commerce does not have enough board members and cannot continue to function as we are today."

The letter states that, according to the chamber's by-laws, the board of directors may consist of no less than seven and no more than 11 directors with four officers.

"For the chamber to continue, these requirements must be met," stated the letter. "We are currently lacking board members and volunteers to function successfully."

The Sentinel had not received a reply to a request to comment from the Creswell chamber as of press time.

Part of the chamber's challenge will be finding people who have time to commit to an all-volunteer board while dealing with financial strain with their own businesses.

Neigh said she had extended a hand on behalf of the Cottage Grove Chamber of Commerce.

"I'm here to help however they want me to help, giving them advice or helping them on the creation of a new board and what that looks like," she said. "Or if they would like to me to reach out to their businesses to see if there's any way that we can help them here, I'm happy to do that, too."

The possibility of absorbing Creswell businesses into the Cottage Grove chamber has even been put on the table in the event the Creswell chamber disbands.

Before the situation comes to that, though, Neigh said she'd prefer the State of Oregon ease restrictions enough for businesses to rebound.

"I don't feel like there's enough money that they can throw out there that is going to help — that's going to correct the damage that's been done," she said. "We need to be heard and we need to be able to open. We need to continue to abide by the rules that are set out there, but they need to let us make the decisions. They need to let us open and let us start to heal ourselves."

Neigh couldn't confirm any local businesses have permanently closed as a result of the pandemic restrictions, yet she suspects at least one and others may be on the brink.

Barring an easing of restrictions, however, local

leaders have taken it upon themselves to find their own solutions.

The City of Cottage Grove, for instance, has made several moves to lighten the load for impacted businesses.

Last July, the city set aside \$100,000 in a financial assistance fund dubbed the Small Business Emergency Loan Program, about a quarter of which was used as a matching grant with Business Oregon. Due to fortuitous circumstances, that matching grant ballooned in the city's favor, eventually allowing for a total of about \$85,000 in grant funding to go to local businesses last year.

Curbside pickup options and canopies have been extended to area businesses as well, providing effective alternatives.

Some canopies are still available to lend out by the city free of charge.

The Cottage Grove Chamber of Commerce has also been searching for solutions, announcing that it will treat any business in the community as a member this year. Area businesses are encouraged to contact the chamber and get on its mailing list.

In an idea inspired by "Charlie and Chocolate Factory," this month the chamber is sponsoring a "golden wrapper" program with local business Sanity Chocolate to incentivize people to shop locally.

Until Feb. 25, patrons can present their receipts from local purchases to the chamber office on Main Street and get a piece of chocolate for every receipt. With each chocolate, there is a chance to find a golden wrapper.

Golden wrapper recipi-

ents are then entered into a drawing for a virtual tour of Sanity Chocolate's bean-to-bar process and a tasting kit.

The drawing will be held on Feb. 26 at Sanity Chocolate.

These solutions are just a few in a string of ideas that have been generated lately by local leaders, though.

"I'm racking my brain and trying to think of things that will help not only right now, but long term," said Neigh. "I don't want to put a Band-Aid on something that we need major surgery for."

In a Jan. 25 Cottage Grove City Council meeting, councilors discussed possible solutions such as waiving a \$25 liquor license renewal fee for businesses impacted by COVID.

Though a small gesture, the notion opened the door for a conversation about other options.

As a result, the city has put in an application for a Travel Oregon grant to pay for the construction of parklets for three downtown businesses.

The parklets, which are sidewalk extensions into street parking spaces providing space for people to rest or dine, were designed and approved by council last year, making the city well-positioned to receive the grant.

The applicant pool is reportedly competitive, however, and recipients will not be announced for another week or so.

An option is also on the table to get access to the remaining loan funds (managed by the third-party Community Lending-Works) from the Small Business Emergency Loan Program and redirect the money toward assisting

with utility bills and other fees for those businesses which have been forced to close or restrict operations during the pandemic.

About \$44,000 is currently left in the fund.

As these ideas have percolated in the background, Neigh and City Manager Richard Meyers have organized virtual meetings with local businesses to brainstorm more solutions to bring to the next city council meeting.

Though no future meet-

ings are currently planned, Neigh encouraged the community to reach out with their own solutions.

"We're always open for ideas," she said. "We can't make every idea happen, but it's that one idea that maybe we didn't think about that could make a huge difference."

The Cottage Grove Chamber of Commerce can be reached at 541-942-2411 or visited online at cgchamber.com.



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South Lane Mental Health, located in Cottage Grove, Oregon, is now providing mental health services for Spanish speaking individuals. Our program, Alas, serves children and adults, individuals, couples, and families. Our services include case management, group therapy, individual therapy and peer support services. We offer in-person services or remote services via telehealth. We can assist with your computer needs if you prefer Telehealth services. For more information and/or to make an appointment, please call 541-942-3939

South Lane Mental Health, ubicado en Cottage Grove, Oregon, ahora ofrece servicios para gente hispano-hablante. Nuestro programa, Alas, apoya a jóvenes, individuos, parejas y familias. Nuestros servicios incluyen el manejo de casos (navegación de recursos y educación comunitaria), terapia de grupo y terapia para individuos. Ofrecemos servicios en persona, por teléfono y por video. Nosotros podemos ayudar con sus necesidades de tecnología si prefiere recibir servicios por teléfono o video. Para más información o para hacer cita, por favor llame a 541-942-3939.



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Contest ends February 25, 2021
Drawing will be a Facebook Live event on February 26 at 1:30PM
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