

## TOURISM

# LOCAL BUSINESSES FACE HOLIDAY UNCERTAINTIES

COVID-19 purple tier restrictions, curfew, and less people traveling weighing on hospitality, tourism



PHOTOS BY JAMES HERRERA — MONTEREY HERALD

With the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays on their way, businesses in the area are dealing with the forecast of people staying home, stricter mask requirements, and a possible "covid curfew."

**By James Herrera**

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**MONTEREY »** An unwelcome guest is causing most everyone to reconsider their plans for Thanksgiving and quite possibly through the Christmas holiday too as COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc.

It is also dashing hopes of local hospitality businesses that the holidays will bring an influx of visitors. On Thursday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a recommendation to Americans not to travel to celebrate Thanksgiving and Gov. Gavin Newsom imposed a curfew in the purple tier counties of California, which includes Monterey County.

"More than 1 million COVID-19 cases were reported in the United States over the last seven days," says the CDC website. "As cases continue to in-

crease rapidly across the United States, the safest way to celebrate Thanksgiving is to celebrate at home with the people you live with."

The COVID curfew went into effect Saturday night. It is a limited stay-at-home order that applies to everyone who isn't an essential worker from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. It does not apply to homeless people or people from the same household going out together as long as they do not mix with others. The order will be in effect until Dec. 21, and may be extended or revised as needed.

"Research studies are showing that there will be a shift in people's travel patterns for the holiday season, and we know our numbers won't be like they were last year," said Rob O'Keefe, Monterey County Convention and Visitors Bureau president and CEO. "Some people will still travel, but accord-



Thanksgiving holiday travel is projected to decrease 9.7% from last year because of health concerns and high unemployment due to the pandemic. California officials are recommending self-quarantining for 14 days upon return if a person travels out of state for Thanksgiving.

ing to a Destination Analysts national survey from Nov. 15, one-third of American travelers are

canceled Thanksgiving trips." O'Keefe said that the Conven-

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tion and Visitors Bureau has heard from area hotels that the impact of the CDC's recent advisory has not had an immediate impact but overall occupancy is still down significantly compared to last year.

"With occupancy down, employment is also significantly down for hospitality workers," said O'Keefe.

Last week, Newsom said officials believe the state's recent increase in coronavirus cases may be tied to Halloween celebrations. As he attempts to tamp down the latest and ever-widening jump in cases, the governor specifically strengthened the state's mask rules making it mandatory for masks to be worn at all times when outside the home with few exceptions.

As area businesses and industries gear up for the holidays, albeit under continued COVID-19 restrictions as Monterey County has never risen above the purple tier, some leaders are struggling to find a silver lining.

"The somewhat educated look ahead at the holiday travel season indicates that it appears to be fairly strong in somewhat relative terms," said Mike La Pier,

Monterey Regional Airport executive director. "Certainly not what we would experience and look forward to in a non-pandemic environment but, according to what we have read, the demand for holiday travel is strong."

The Monterey airport's traffic continues to recover somewhat to the point where it experienced just under 40% of its 2019 levels year-over-year so far in 2020, said La Pier.

But trying to figure out how the latest COVID-19 surge coupled with self-quarantine recommendations, will impact traveler numbers is hard to gauge.

"It is hard to know exactly what the impact of the spike in cases and the recommendations will do to the number of travelers airlines and airports actually see," said La Pier. "The short answer is the season was trending to be a fairly active one but it is hard to predict what the impact of the surge and new recommendations will be on actual travel numbers."

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Holiday travel is projected to decrease 9.7% from last year because of health concerns and high

unemployment due to the pandemic, according to the American Automobile Association.

Auto travel is expected to decrease 4.3% but is the only mode of transportation to see share growth for the holiday with nearly 95% of all trips happening by car compared to 89% last year.

Air travel nationally will decrease nearly 48% over last year with the share of travel falling from 8% to 4.7%.

But smaller numbers of visitors to the Monterey Peninsula area this holiday season is only one factor facing restaurants and stores.

Frank Geisler, Monterey Peninsula Chamber of Commerce CEO, said that the biggest concern for businesses is centered around additional restrictions including the now imposed "coronavirus curfew."

The non-essential activities during curfew hours are more likely related to social activities and gatherings. Those have a higher likelihood of people's inhibitions being lowered and a reduced likelihood to adhere to COVID-19 preventive measures such as social distancing, mask wearing, and hand sanitizing. In Monterey County, it will likely affect restaurants that offer outdoor seating though take-out and drive-

thru will still be allowed.

"(Monterey County) elected officials have been trying their best to influence the state" to get out from under the purple tier but so far have been ineffective, said Geisler.

With the weather getting colder and nightfall coming earlier, restaurants were looking to move some dining inside. But with the current coronavirus situation growing more dire, the focus again will be on take-out food, which for many is not enough business to sustain them through the winter.

"There is a lot of worry from restaurants and stores as well," said Geisler.

One good development came from the city of Monterey at last week's council meeting, according to Geisler. Businesses on both wharves will be allowed the placement of heaters, pending a fire department inspection to approve them, to better serve patrons where businesses have chosen to operate outdoors.

Geisler said some businesses are doing OK and holding steady so it is not all doom and gloom, but the hospitality industry and related businesses continue to struggle.

The Monterey Peninsula Chamber chief said that the holidays will be difficult for many businesses and stresses that support for them right now from locals and visitors alike is very important to help them bridge the gap into the first quarter of 2021, and hopefully a vaccine.

The coming holiday "will be a continuation of what (hotels) have been seeing these days," said Jeroen Gerrese, Monterey County Hospitality Association board chair.

Group travel isn't happening so there are no meetings along with the accompanying business it generates such as catering and event planning. Leisure travel is part of the picture but attractions including the Monterey Bay Aquarium remain closed and

business groups are usually the bridge during the off-season for the hospitality industry.

"We're expecting a 50% to 60% drop in year-over-year revenue," said Gerrese.

The Hospitality Association board chair said that some form of stimulus from the government is still a possibility.

"Hopefully it's forthcoming but hope is never a strategy with the long dark days of winter upon us," said Gerrese.

According to the Monterey County Convention and Visitors Bureau, from March 1 through Nov. 14, it is estimated that Monterey County demand for hotel nights fell by 1.05 million. In 2019 it was 2.42 million and this year it was 1.37 million.

Hotel revenue fell by \$296 million, \$514 million last year and \$218 million this year, compared to the same period in 2019.

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