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The Desert Sun

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2020 | DESERTSUN.COM

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CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Newsom issues 10 p.m. curfew

One-month order affects counties in purple tier; enforcement unclear

Nicole Hayden, Christopher Damien, Melissa Daniels and Rebecca Plevin
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Gov. Gavin Newsom has announced a 10 p.m. curfew that will start Saturday and last for a month in California counties that are in the strictest level of the

state's pandemic restrictions, amid a drastic rise in COVID-19 cases.

Non-essential work and gatherings must shut down from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. in the 41 counties in California's purple tier, which includes 94% of the state's nearly 40 million residents. The order will be in effect until Dec. 21, but could be extended if infection rates and disease trends don't improve.

"The virus is spreading at a pace we haven't seen since the start of this pandemic and the next several days and weeks will be critical to stop the surge. We are sounding the alarm," Newsom said in a statement. "It

Curfew FAQ

Everything you need to know about new rules. **9A**

is crucial that we act to decrease transmission and slow hospitalizations before the death count surges. We've done it before and we must do it again."

The state, which hit the grim milestone of 1 million coronavirus cases last week, has reported more than 10,000 new daily cases four times since last Thursday.

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Pandemic exposes vulnerabilities in valley's economy

Melissa Daniels
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Coachella Valley's dependence on tourism intensified the economic earthquakes brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. And to Coachella Valley Economic Partnership President and CEO Joe Wallace, this presents a chance to revamp the desert economy.

This, he said, is a time for boldness and vision. "It is imperative for the Coachella Valley to come out of this crisis better and more sustainable than we

See **TOURISM**, Page 2A

USA TODAY

Long lines reemerge and strain coronavirus testing

With coronavirus cases surging and families hoping to gather safely for Thanksgiving, long lines to get tested have reappeared across the U.S. — a reminder that the system remains unable to keep pace. **9A**

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A win for weed delivery

In what could be a temporary victory for California's legal cannabis industry, a judge has dismissed a lawsuit that sought to overturn a state rule allowing home deliveries statewide.
RICHARD VOGEL/AP



A heron takes flight in a managed wetlands area at the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge in July. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Salton Sea bill seeks to hold feds accountable for funds

Mark Olalde
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Southern California Democrats Rep. Raul Ruiz and Rep. Juan Vargas introduced a new bill on Thursday that would force the federal government to take a more active role in funding and managing Salton Sea habitat restoration and dust suppression.

HR 8775, the Salton Sea Public Health and Environmental Protection Act, would create an interagency working group called the Salton Sea Management Council to coordinate projects around the lake's receding shoreline.

If passed, the bill would also commission a public health study, increase air quality monitoring requirements and pull an undisclosed amount of federal

See **SALTON SEA**, Page 5A



Rep. Raul Ruiz's bill would force the federal government to take a more active role in the Salton Sea.
MARK OLALDE/
THE DESERT SUN

"My bill will bring significant federal funding, streamline coordination, expedite projects, and ensure agencies follow through with their commitment to the Sea and my constituents."

U.S. Rep. Raul Ruiz

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Tourism

Continued from Page 1A

were last February,” he said. “The virus of the century is the opportunity of the century.”

The 16th Annual Greater Palm Springs Summit organized by CVEP held Thursday was virtual this year, minus the buffet-style breakfast and hundreds of handshakes that would typically take place at the region’s premier economic forecast.

And while last year focused on demographic trends and a few bright spots for economic growth in the Coachella Valley, this year centered on the myriad ways the coronavirus pandemic took a hammer to the local economy, and what may be involved in the long, hard process of rebuilding.

Wallace said the pandemic has laid bare some of the biggest economic challenges for the region: the dependence on tourism, for example, and the need for better technology so people can work or go to school from home.

Meanwhile, there’s uncertainty about the ultimate duration of the pandemic, when a successful vaccine may be in circulation, if there will be more federal aid, or whether more businesses will have to shut down in the face of uncontrollable spread.

But the good news is that the desert’s relatively affordable cost of living compared to coastal California is enticing new people to move here, Wallace said. And he hopes that the challenges presented by the pandemic will cause the growth of a year-round economy.

“It is essential that the Coachella Valley does what is needed to become essential,” he said.

Leisure and hospitality blows

For Wallace, who has previously advocated for a diversified economy, the pandemic fallout underscores the danger of a single-industry local economy.

“It took about 75 years to build what is one of the world’s most vibrant tourism industries out there,” he said. “If there had been a parallel effort in technology and other things, we wouldn’t have been hit nearly as hard.”

In the Coachella Valley, unemployment went from 7.2% to about 34% at the worst point of the pandemic. Automation trends are accelerating, which may put more people out of work. Around 31% of people are working from home, compared to 38% for the national average. Between 30% to 50% of local businesses are at risk of failure.

Wallace said there’s about a five-year recovery outlook in the tourism space.

Manfred Keil, an economist and professor at Claremont McKenna University who focuses on the Inland Empire and gives an annual address at the sum-

mit, said the regions across America that were hit the hardest were those with big hospitality sectors, such as Hawaii and Nevada.

In the Coachella Valley, the tourism downturn fueled the high unemployment rate — prior to the pandemic, about one in four jobs in the valley were linked to hospitality.

These job losses are disproportionately affecting low-wage workers: hospitality jobs are among the lowest-paid and most common work in the Coachella Valley. That sector is disproportionately people of color; in restaurants, for example, more than 80% of chefs, nearly 70% of supervisors and managers, and nearly 64% of waitstaffs at California restaurants are nonwhite, according to the California Restaurant Association.

Small business revenues in the hospitality sector also plummeted.

Keil said ZIP codes most connected to hospitality saw the biggest drop in small business revenue — among the worst hit in the valley was 92262, the northern part of Palm Springs where small businesses saw an 80% drop in revenue in April through May compared to the start of the year.

Keil said the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival was his “canary in the coal mine” for how bad the pandemic-induced economic downturn would be. Not holding the festival in October — and possibly not in the spring of 2021, though it hasn’t officially been canceled — signals that the recovery is slow.

“Let’s hope it happens by October,” he said. “It’s going to be a difficult spring, but hopefully we’ll be rebounding.”

Steps for future growth

Wallace is anticipating more population growth to come from high earners who move to the desert as their jobs switch from on-site to remote, which will in turn boost the area’s overall profile. He recently hosted a call for about 200 entrepreneurs interested in relocating to the Coachella Valley.

These newcomers will boost the median household income of the region, help desensitize businesses for future economic shocks, raise the educational attainment and “upgrade the workforce” in a way that makes the area more attractive and “essential,” Wallace said.

In return, these newcomers get to live here, where there are 360 days of sunshine and friendly residents, Wallace said. For these workers, with a median salary of around \$220,000 for some types of engineering jobs, moving here offers an affordable option for housing compared to the Bay Area, Wallace said.

“They will elevate us, as we elevate them,” he said.

But a host of other game-changing steps need to be part of the recovery, Wallace said.



Agricultural workers have been deemed “essential” for the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are undocumented and have no safety net. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

These include:

- Fostering a more comprehensive university system;
- Investing in state-of-the-art communication with better bandwidth and 5G technology;
- Fostering competitive K-12 public schools;
- Putting a regional focus on “everything,” Wallace said, bringing together the nine cities for a stronger unit of around 500,000 people;
- Investing in better transportation options;
- Devising a plan for the future of the Salton Sea.

Also key to the recovery is re-establishing the “cash cows” of hospitality and tourism, Wallace said.

On housing: Some ‘mixed signals’

A booming real estate market is considered a bright spot for the Coachella Valley economy. Houses are selling quickly and record-low mortgage rates are fueling buying, while the influx of residents are coming here from coastal cities as they adjust to a remote work life.

But overall, Keil said the housing sector is sending “mixed signals.”

Keil presented data showing that for the nine valley cities, housing prices were all up by double digits in the third quarter of 2020 compared to the same time last year. For example, homes in Palm Springs are selling for a median of \$707,500, an increase of 15.1% compared to the \$614,500 they were going for last year.

In La Quinta, home prices saw the biggest percentage increase going from \$455,000 in the third quarter of 2019 compared to \$565,000 in the fourth quarter of 2020. That’s a jump of over 24%

So far, sales of existing houses in the valley have been stronger in the third quarter, surpassing levels seen in 2018 and 2019. While those are strong numbers that indicate the real estate market is doing well, the increases underscore how expensive it is to become a homeowner in California.

Prices aren’t necessarily going to get any better any time soon, either.

Keil also said that housing starts (the

amount of new single-family houses commencing construction) are not particularly high, which is usually an indicator of a strong economy.

“Having a lean supply drives up prices,” Keil said.

Regional plans to address equity

The keynote speaker at the summit was Kome Ajise, who is the executive director at Southern California Association of Governments, the regional planning agency for Riverside, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, Ventura, Orange and Imperial counties.

His presentation focused on the “Connect SoCal” plan that outlines economic and development plans for the region through 2045, and “focusing on an inclusive economic recovery.”

The plan aims to address challenges that are widespread, systemic and persistent: 78% of people living in flood hazard areas are people of color. About 21% of farmlands have been lost since 1984, while there are about 1,500 annual traffic fatalities.

Goals of Connect SoCal include adapting to climate change with a decrease of 19% in greenhouse gas emissions in the next 15 years, diversifying housing type to ensure working class people can afford homes, and as much as \$640 billion in widespread infrastructure projects.

Addressing the “digital divide,” or lack of access to technology, is also a priority, Ajise said.

Ajise commended the work that local leaders and the Coachella Valley Association of Governments have done developing the CV Link, with 20 miles of jogging and biking paths slated to start construction next month. The project is planned to be more than 40 miles of pathways that run through the valley to allow people to get around in ways other than cars.

He sees the Coachella Valley rebounding its tourism business and continuing to use its status as a destination as economic driver. But he also underscored the need for becoming a hub for health care or energy jobs. All this, he said, will help bring the region up and address disadvantaged communities.

But such progress is incumbent upon ensuring residents are provided with opportunities to develop skills and education, which hasn’t historically been the case.

“We know there is a disparity in educational attainment between the valley and the rest of the state,” Ajise said. “That presents itself as a unique opportunity for the valley to grow and develop their knowledge-based economy.”

Melissa Daniels covers economic development, hospitality and local business in the Coachella Valley. She can be reached at (760)-567-8458, melissa.daniels@desertsun.com, or on Twitter @melissamdaniels.



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Postal information

The Desert Sun, USPS #155-000, is published Monday through Sunday at 750 N. Gene Autry Trail, Palm Springs, CA 92262. Periodicals postage paid at Palm Springs, CA 92262.
Postmaster: Send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 62670, San Angelo, TX 76906.