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NEWS, 12A

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Betty Ford Center to begin \$30M expansion

Ena Sasic
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Betty Ford Center is gearing up for a major facelift that includes the construction of three buildings and updates to the grounds — changes that officials say will further serve the center’s purpose of helping those with addiction and mental health issues.

The four-year, \$30 million project — the most significant expansion since the center was established in 1982 — will transform the Rancho Mirage campus founded by former first lady Betty Ford and former U.S. Ambassador Leonard Firestone.

A groundbreaking ceremony will take place at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday at the center, located at 39-000 Bob Hope Drive. Rancho Mirage Mayor Ted Weill, outgoing Hazleden Betty Ford Foundation President and CEO Mark Mishek, incoming President and CEO Dr. Joseph Lee and Susan Ford Bales, daughter of former President Gerald Ford and the first lady, will make remarks.

Lee, who takes over June 18, said it

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The Betty Ford Center expansion project will break ground Tuesday. PROVIDED BY BETTY FORD CENTER



La Quinta Cliffhouse employee Adan Marquez clears a table during dinner service on April 28 in La Quinta. VICKIE CONNOR/THE DESERT SUN

Hospitality industry struggling to restaff

Some say shortage putting a strain on existing workers

James B. Cutchin Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Restaurant manager Dave Garvey is facing an unusual problem after surviving a year of shut-downs and operating restrictions.

“When we opened up and we could seat on the patios, that’s when it started,” Garvey said. “We needed to hire a hostess and a busboy.”

“We got no applications,” he said. “People didn’t want to come back.”

Garvey, general manager of the La Quinta Cliff-

house, is one of countless hospitality business managers across the Coachella Valley who are struggling to find enough workers. Many local businesses say the problem is putting a strain on existing staff and limiting revenue opportunities amid a rebound in customer demand.

“We don’t have enough hostesses, we don’t have enough busboys and we don’t have enough food runners,” Garvey said. “It’s putting everyone in an exhausted state who has decided to work.”

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Will cities continue virtual meeting options post pandemic?

Erin Rode
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

For over a year, members of the public have joined local city council meetings virtually, using phones, Zoom and other teleconference systems to participate in public meetings and make public comments.

While virtual meetings now feel like second nature for many, they are a somewhat new concept for municipal

government meetings.

Under the Brown Act, officials and members of the public must be physically present at a meeting in order to participate. But, Gov. Gavin Newsom waived this requirement via a March 2020 executive order at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Newsom’s order also authorized local government bodies to hold their public meetings virtually.

Whether cities can continue to offer virtual options now that the pandemic

begins to wane will depend on whether the governor’s executive order is extended, or if a new bill requiring local governments to provide remote-participation options passes.

Assembly Bill 339 would change the Brown Act to require all meetings to include an opportunity to attend telephonically and through the internet. Meetings would still need to include an in-person public comment opportunity.

Assembly members Alex Lee, D-San Jose, and Cristina Garcia, D-Bell Gar-

dens, coauthored the bill.

“COVID-19 has exacerbated existing barriers that prevent people from participating in one of our democracy’s greatest features — public discourse designed to inform the rules and policies that govern us. In addition, linguistic, physical, and geographic isolation prevents constituents from exercising their civic duties, which limits our governing bodies from achieving their full poten-

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USA TODAY

Border reunions planned

The Biden administration said four families separated at the Mexican border will be reunited in what Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas calls “just the beginning” of a broader effort. **14A**

Hewitt to run for governor

Riverside County Supervisor Jeff Hewitt outlined why he is running for governor in an op-ed published in several Southern California News Group newspapers over the weekend. The Libertarian businessman is running to challenge Gov. Gavin Newsom in the upcoming recall election. **3A**

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Shortage

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The coronavirus pandemic hit leisure and hospitality jobs harder than any other sector in the state. There were 1.4 million leisure and hospitality workers on payroll across California in March, according to the California Employment Development Department, down 29% relative to pre-pandemic levels. The next most impacted sector — which includes services such as hair-cutting and repair work — was down roughly 20%, although that sector only employs about one third of the workers that leisure and hospitality does.

Unlike most of the last year, however — when mandated shutdowns and declines in demand drove layoffs — employers now say a reluctance to return to work is depressing employment growth across the country.

“Not in my 30 years of being a hotel operator have I seen anything like this,” said Steven Boswell, manager of Hotel Zoso and Palm Mountain Resort and Spa in Palm Springs.

“I’m calling people back and they’re like, ‘I can’t because I can’t get a babysitter,’” he said. “I’m thinking, ‘Well, that wasn’t a problem before.’”

There are many possible reasons for the worker shortage, including ongoing virtual schooling requiring some parents to stay home and some workers having moved or changed industries over the course of the pandemic. Most local business owners, however, point to increased unemployment benefits as the root of the problem.

“Some people are making more money than when they were working,” Boswell said. “We’ll have the same problem until that changes.”

Like many employers, Boswell said the trend is particularly acute among the lowest paying jobs, such as those in housekeeping.

The hotel manager said the resulting understaffing issues are preventing his businesses from taking advantage of the rebound in customer demand.

“We have managers cleaning rooms. We have food and beverage (staff) cleaning rooms. I have people that were working two weeks in a row without a day off,” he said. “We just finally had to stop taking reservations because we couldn’t turn the rooms fast enough.”

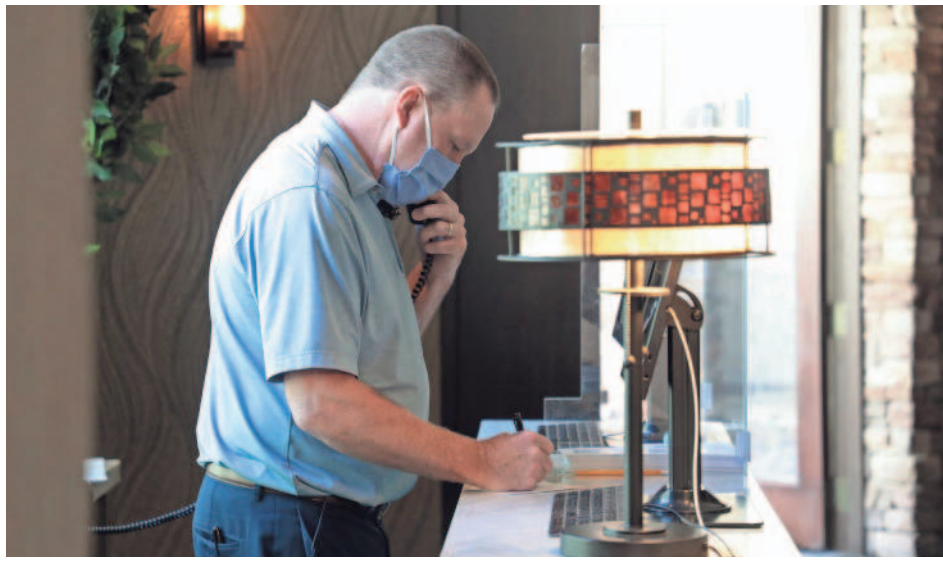
Unemployment benefits to blame?

The federal government has offered boosted payments and more lenient conditions for collecting unemployment benefits for much of the last year. In the early days of the pandemic, between late March and July, the CARES Act added an additional \$600 per week to state unemployment payments nationwide. Upon its expiration, that supplement was replaced with a \$300 federal payment through executive and legislative action. The current \$300 federal supplement extends until September.

Taken together with state unemployment benefits, this means that Californians can collect up to \$750 per week in unemployment compensation until this fall.

“This problem will last until the benefits run out,” J.C. Constant, owner of French bistro Pomme Frite in Palm Springs, said of the worker shortage.

“The people that were making \$13 an hour working 40 hours per week are



La Quinta Cliffhouse general manager Dave Garvey assists with hosting duties at the start of dinner hour April 28 in La Quinta, Calif. VICKIE CONNOR/THE DESERT SUN

now making (way more on unemployment),” he said. “I can’t compete with that.”

Constant attributed the worker shortage directly to the boosted unemployment payments, which he said began affecting his ability to hire last year.

“The writing is on the wall. Everybody knows it,” he said. “I don’t blame them. Some of them are making more money than if they were working.”

Ariel Metzler, a cocktail server at the Ritz-Carlton in Rancho Mirage, said she had also noticed the staffing shortages but doubted that it was due to the increased unemployment payments.

“Coming back we had a shorter staff,” Metzler said. “Other servers that I worked with, they got laid off, (but) they didn’t get brought back.”

The Ritz-Carlton’s press office did not respond to a request for comment.

Metzler said she was laid off alongside most of her coworkers when the pandemic hit last March. She was brought back on in the fall, but was laid off again in December amid the statewide spike in COVID-19 cases. Metzler said she began work again when the Ritz-Carlton’s bar fully reopened in February, but she had to go on medical leave shortly after due to an unrelated condition.

The server said she collected unemployment payments for the first time in her life last year. While the benefits were helpful in meeting her bills, Metzler said they weren’t enough to de-incentivize most servers from coming back to work.

“The money that you make in the food and hospitality industry is so much that it would be too much to go down to that (level of income),” Metzler said. “I’m sure that there are people who milk the benefits of the unemployment, but I don’t think that outweighs the people who want to work.”

Metzler acknowledged that the situation could be different for the lowest paid workers, like bussers and hostesses. She added that some of her former coworkers were still collecting unemployment compensation while they waited to get called back to their old positions, but that this was due to a desire to avoid changing jobs or take on low-paying roles, rather than a general desire to avoid work.

The server said ongoing fears of contracting the virus could also be keeping some people out of work, but added that she doubted it was a central factor in the thinner staffing among local hospitality businesses. That view generally aligned with that of local hospitality business managers, most of whom said they doubted genuine fears of COVID were

the main reason some workers weren’t returning.

Data on the relative danger of catching COVID faced by hospitality workers is limited and somewhat conflicting. Accommodation and food services workers only accounted for 8% of COVID-19 cases with employment data available in a December study by the Washington State Department of Health.

A widely reported but not yet peer-reviewed study by researchers at UC San Francisco suggested that some hospitality workers were among the most at-risk during the pandemic. That study found that cooks had a 60% increase in mortality rates associated with the pandemic — the highest of any profession. Some observers say the Coachella Valley’s relatively unique seasonality may also be exacerbating the worker shortage.

“Every year, many people (in the hospitality industry) go on unemployment in the summer,” said Joe Wallace, head of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership.

Unlike many seasonal resort destinations, which have strong summer seasons, Wallace said state and local reopening timelines coincided unfortunately with the Coachella Valley’s typical summer lull amid triple-digit temperatures.

With only a partial season open and anticipated layoffs in the summer, Wallace said some workers might be genuinely concerned about getting off of regular unemployment payments in the spring.

California had a backlog of more than 1 million unpaid unemployment claims each week between early March and mid-April of this year. Nearly 124,000 claims were pending action from the state for more than 21 days as of Wednesday, according to the Employment Development Department, while the rest are pending action from the applicants.

Wallace said that some workers might fear long delays until they can receive unemployment payments after getting laid off this summer, deterring them from returning to work in the first place.

The CVEP head added that he thought the region could be in for a better-than-usual summer season this year, but that this would likely not be enough to avoid some layoffs.

Shortage could accelerate automation

With a quarter of Coachella Valley

workers directly employed in the hospitality sector, according to CVEP, all of this is likely to put a drag on the region’s economic recovery.

“If you try to get a restaurant reservation now, they have less seats to sell,” he said. “That’s for two reasons; the (COVID-19) restrictions and the worker shortage.”

“Both of those contribute to the contraction of revenue in the whole hospitality business,” he said. “All of these things have an impact, and none of them are positive compared to 2019.”

Wallace said his organization has estimated economic losses in the region of up to \$10 billion over the last year due to missed tourism and services revenue.

Wallace added, however, that long-term impact of the shortage might actually be positive for innovation in the hospitality industry — if not for all of its workers.

“The valley is always going to be a tourism mecca nine months out of the year,” Wallace said. “The question is how many personal services will be needed by those tourists.”

According to Wallace, worker shortages may accelerate the pace at which hotels, restaurants and other hospitality businesses look to automate work. He noted that positions such as hostesses and front desk staff were low-hanging fruit for this type of change. “Those functions are automated to a certain extent,” he said.

“You can already book (a restaurant table) on Yelp. When you get there they have a person to walk you to your seat,” he said. “That’s pleasant, but is it needed? No. They can eliminate that role right now if they need to.”

“The industry will retool and improve as a result of this,” he added.

David Smith, a labor economist at Pepperdine, agreed that the worker shortage could further incentivize businesses to automate some roles.

“Automation is coming regardless, but it may have been accelerated by this,” Smith said.

Smith said that food preparation staff and positions like bussers and hostesses were the most likely candidates for near-term automation, while serving staff will be farther off “because that’s part of the experience.”

The economist was sanguine about the long-term economic impacts of the worker shortage, noting simply that “the market will sort it out.”

He added, however, that its timing resulted in an unfortunate missed opportunity for businesses to rebound more quickly from the COVID-19 downturn.

“Whenever there is a shortage, it’s unfortunate because there is an opportunity that’s kind of lost,” he said.

Despite missed revenue and the long hours, Cliffhouse’s Garvey said the worker shortage has had one silver lining for his La Quinta business.

“It’s taught me a new way of communicating to my staff, especially to new people,” he said.

“You’ve got to make everyone who you hire work out,” he said. “You’ve got to motivate people, you’ve got to talk with them. You have to cultivate the people that you get because there’s not a door No. 2.”

“Maybe the problem won’t be as bad for me next year because (the workers will) tell their friends that it’s good working here,” he said.

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