

Support Local By Mayor Boot

Last week Dr. Bonnie Henry announced a modest easing of pandemic restrictions. With the vaccination roll-out underway and warmer days heralding spring, we have much to be grateful for.

Over the next many months as we slowly, but steadily, return to some semblance of pre-pandemic life, let's remember that local business owners and their staff are counting on us to continue to support them.

Following several months of closure last spring, the majority of Summerland businesses--hair and nail salons/barbers, dentists and other professional services, retailers and eateries, banking institutions, visitor/tourist accommodators, tasting rooms and farmers' markets—have, at least in some fashion, reopened.

Reopening has been done at considerable financial expense and, at least in some instances, with substantial anxiety and concern for staff and personal safety and the safety of business patrons.

Business plans likely did not account for lost income (a pandemic is typically not a named peril in a business interruption insurance clause), staff pandemic plan training, or purchases of personal protection equipment or sanitizers. Expenses related to additional signage and Plexiglas barriers, or recruiting and training costs for new staff to replace those who had to seek employment elsewhere were probably not planned for either.

So, business owners may not only be experiencing personal mental or emotional health impacts, but also carry worries about unforeseen business expenses, particularly when their company supplies the sole source of household income.

It's not all doom and gloom in the business sector, of course. Several winery owners had excellent sales in spite of the long-term closing of tasting rooms; some local accommodators experienced a similarly strong year, as did those in the construction industry.

Most business owners quickly offered different ways of serving customers while observing the public health orders. Restaurants went online for takeout service; curbside pick up, delivery to your parked vehicle or direct shipping was made available; opening of outdoor, properly distanced spaces; and offering services by phone or web conferencing. Business to business (B2B) support and collaboration appears to have increased, as well as business (and individual) donations to the Summerland Food Bank. These are but a few examples of the tenacity, flexibility and innovation of Summerland business owners.

Council approved a number of initiatives to help ease the burden on businesses as a whole. For example, last July and August commercial and industrial ratepayers received a 25% reduction in their water rates; agricultural users (yes, agriculture is at least part of their livelihood) received this reduction for the entire irrigation season. Most recently, Council has waived District of Summerland business licence fees for 2021.

Not only did travel restrictions have a significant impact on the arrival of critical temporary agricultural foreign workers, housing migrant workers who were able to meet stringent health regulations had difficulty finding shelter upon arrival. District staff worked with the Province to set aside a number of spaces in the Peach Orchard Campground (which is publicly owned) to temporarily house agricultural workers in a safe environment. (The Province covered 100% of the costs.) The District is looking at continued support for 2021 for domestic temporary agricultural workers.

One of Council's six strategic priorities is Downtown Vibrancy. This priority includes the development of a Downtown Neighbourhood Plan. The call for volunteers for the Task Force has been completed and the work (expected to take up to 18 months) is underway. The Task Force's objectives include creating actionable projects and policies for implementation that will provide direction and guidance for staff in the preparation of the Downtown Neighbourhood Action Plan.

Just as essential retailers and services supported our wellbeing during even the earliest weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, as we move into vaccinations and some lifting of restrictions let's show our gratitude to the staff and business owners that have kept our local economy alive.

Time to pay it forward, Summerland...please Shop Local.