

(Left) Josh Mills, who owns The Bookstore in downtown Chico with his wife, Muir Hughes, has implemented as many safety measures as possible and enforces a strict mask-wearing policy.

PHOTO BY ASHIAH SCHARAGA

nesses closed from March 1 to August 31 this year, according to Yelp's Local Economic Impact Report for September 2020. Of those businesses, Yelp reports that 60 percent (97,966) are permanently closed.

Helping hands

In the era of COVID-19, Thoma said the chamber has become a one-stop shop for information on how to remain sustainable, including financial resources, customer retention tips, understanding ordinances and laws, and navigating payroll requirements.

The chamber recognized that many small businesses don't have the luxury of dedicated human resources, legal and marketing departments, and that's where the organization could step in, Thoma said.

"We wanted to be the go-to place for information for small-business owners," she said.

Meanwhile, Melanie Bassett, executive director of the DCBA, said the pandemic prompted her organization to launch a long-considered venture.

With a specialized loan from 3CORE, a nonprofit economic-development corporation that serves businesses, the DCBA created the Downtown Chico Online Marketplace in time for the holiday season (see info box). It's an online portal that curates a variety of downtown business and restaurant offerings all in one place, designed to make it easier and more efficient for people to shop locally.

Chico Chamber of Commerce President Katy Thoma (pictured in March) says she's concerned that more businesses won't make it through the pandemic due to financial and emotional strain exacerbated by uncertainty.

CN&R FILE PHOTO BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

Only 34 percent of downtown businesses had an online presence before the DCBA launched the initiative, Bassett noted. Now, about two-thirds are online.

The DCBA recognized that shopping locally this holiday season is more significant than ever, Bassett said. Sales during this time can make up nearly a quarter of a business' yearly revenue.

"It's important for our community and it's important for those businesses to stay open and be successful," she said. "It's been a rough year for them."

The DCBA also has worked closely with the city of Chico to roll out changes that help its members adapt to social distancing. The City Council approved expanded outdoor dining via parklets, which have allowed restaurants to use portions of the streets for seating. Retailers and restaurants also can reserve parking spaces for curbside pickup and take-out options. Until recently, the city waived parking fees throughout downtown. Several major parking lots still offer free parking.

Interestingly, the city's coffers—funded primarily through sales tax revenues—are in better shape than anticipated, Administrative Services Director Scott Dowell told the CN&R.

"We know that, unfortunately, the restaurants have been hurt, and I think everyone understands that. But car sales and some of the retail businesses that generate sales tax, those have continued to do OK and better than what was projected," he said.

Several restaurants in Chico have closed their doors since the pandemic and appear to be the first to feel the impacts. This mirrors a national trend (see sidebar page 10).

Thousands of eateries in the country have shuttered, and absent additional financial assistance, those in the industry anticipate

NEWSLINES CONTINUED ON PAGE 10



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