

La Hacienda co-owner Michelle Sereda is trying to ramp up staffing in anticipation of California reopening on June 15.

Still, since entering the orange tier on March 31, the county has experienced a bump in cases, with infection numbers breaking 100 per week four times in five weeks after going a full month below that threshold.

"If you notice, people aren't wearing their masks as readily as they were, even walking downtown when there's lots of people around," Thoma continued. "We've got a lot of people vaccinated now—we're moving in a really positive direction—so I think people are feeling bolder and more secure, which is great. But they still need to know they need to continue to wear a mask and socially distance where required."

Melanie Bassett, executive director of the Downtown Chico Business Association, shares that safeguarded optimism. After shuttering events that bring the public downtown, the DCBA is bringing back—later in spring than usual—Thursday Night Market today (May 6) and Friday Night Concerts on May 28.

"People are very much looking forward to it and very much embracing things opening up," she said by phone. "I think people are really needing connection, and they're very excited about that date [June 15] and getting prepared for it. I'm hearing enthusiasm; I don't know that I've heard anything negative."

"There are still folks that are concerned about safety. We are, too—that's why we didn't hold any events last year at all. We're intending to follow the guidelines for whatever [mandates are] in place ... and encourage people to be courteous and appropriate."

Katy Thoma, president and CEO of the Chico Chamber of Commerce, stresses diligence with COVID-19 protocols in order to keep the local economy moving in a positive direction.

Financial life jackets

The DCBA itself is an example of pandemic resilience. Bassett said the organization "came close to closing our doors" and has downsized dramatically. Staff is down from five to two; and the office has moved to a "small but serviceable" shared space adjacent to Kirk's Jewelry.

Likewise, Sereda said La Hacienda verged on closure several times during the height of restrictions. She and fellow owners Margarita Vega and Javier Partida—all with at least 20 years' tenure at the restaurant—felt heartbroken at the prospect.

"You definitely don't want to be the end of the generations," Sereda said. "We'd like to see it go on another 70 years. That's all of our main objective, and hopefully our children will want to take it over so it will remain a family long-term establishment."

Chelsea Irvine, community resource manager at the three-county economic development district 3Core, told the CN&R by phone that businesses have myriad means of support. These include grants from government entities and nonprofits; low-interest and forgivable loans; and expertise from agencies such as hers, the Small Business Development Center, Alliance for Workforce Development, North State Planning and Development Collective, and SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives).

The North Valley Community Foundation granted more than \$1 million so far to bolster local businesses thanks in large part to NFL quarterback and recent *Jeopardy!* guest host Aaron Rodgers. The Butte Business Stabilization Grant, approved by county supervisors, infused \$4.7 million. 3Core is administering locally the California Relief Grant, which to date has brought \$2.6 million to Butte County; the application period for the

NEWSLINES CONTINUED ON PAGE 15





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