



Christian & Johnson owner Melissa Heringer has seen increased interest in special events as more people in the area get COVID-19 vaccinations.

final round of granting closed Tuesday.

Meanwhile, on top of payroll protection (PPP) and Small Business Administration (SBA) loans, owners of shuttered arts/entertainment venues and restaurants are about to get sector-specific opportunities from the SBA: the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant and the Restaurant Revitalization Fund.

"There's all these funding sources around," Irvine said. "With the reopening on June 15, that's giving businesses more hope. But I think the county being forward-thinking in putting together that [stabilization] grant program, that's when businesses were [thinking] realistically it's a year of 'Can we make it?'—and those \$15,000 [to] \$25,000 grants were the bridge that got them through."

Bouncing back

Business at Christian & Johnson Flowers and Gifts slowed during the peak of the pandemic but never stopped. That's because the state classified agriculture as an essential sector of the economy, and as an ag-product outlet, the florist stayed open for deliveries and curbside pickup.

In 2018, Christian & Johnson relocated from its longtime location on Vallombrosa Avenue to a corner store on East First Avenue, where owner Melissa Heringer enjoyed an uptick in shoppers after the move. Closing the doors to in-person business halted that momentum, but the demand for floral arrangements remained high enough that she retained her entire crew. Restrictions eased last fall, permitting customers back inside.

"Foot traffic was definitely down, because people still weren't out and about doing shop-

ping like they normally would," Heringer said. "We have noticed, just in the last month or two, as people have gotten vaccinated and things have started to open up a little bit more, things are definitely feeling like they're getting back to normal as far as foot traffic goes.

"I feel very optimistic," she continued. "I've had quite a few brides call for consultations. We're seeing events start to happen again. We've even gotten to do events that are out of town. I think people are ready to get back to life as usual, pre-pandemic lifestyles."

Thoma said retail businesses, such as Christian & Johnson, may face less of a ramping-up process than restaurants. An eatery will need to make significant changes to increase capacity from 50 percent to 100 percent, while stores rarely—if ever—encounter 100 percent occupancy.

Challenging all sectors, though, is staffing. In Butte County, Help Wanted signs and ads abound. The business owners and organizations cite various factors for the scarce job pool: predominantly, supplements to unemployment benefits (which expire Sept. 4); a shrunken college-student population due to Chico State's remote instruction; and Covid-related health concerns about interacting with the public. Some employers dangle hiring bonuses, as much as \$1,000, for entry-level positions.

"Business owners are so desperate to get workers," Thoma said. "It's very competitive."

La Hacienda, which typically employs college students as servers, has received an inordinate number of applications from high school students—and Sereda said many adult applicants fail to show for interviews.

Nonetheless, the restaurant's owners approach June 15 with "more hope now," Sereda said, adding this message to customers: "Be patient. We'll get there." □

Resources available:

Local business owners can access loans, grants and other support from 3Core, the economic development district that includes Butte County. Visit 3coreedc.org or call 893-8732.

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