

Plea for help: Vermont innkeepers meet with Rep. Welch

Even with new aid, hospitality businesses fear long wait for return to normalcy

By Stewart Ledbetter || NBC5 Anchor/Reporter || January 11, 2021

Hotel Vermont is open for business, but few guests are checking in or out.

On Monday morning, general manager Hans Van Wees said, the highly-rated 125-room hotel in the heart of Burlington had exactly two guests.

The reason, hotel leaders said, is the continuing COVID-19 health threat which has prompted Vermont Gov. Phil Scott to impose mandatory 14-day quarantine for anyone entering the state and travel restrictions across the northeast. Even as the vaccination effort begins to roll out, business conditions for many Vermont inns and hotels are dire

"There's been a lot of talk about a 'V-shaped' recovery. we think the travel industry will take 2-3 years before we start to see the levels from 2019 again," Van Wees said.

The industry is in trouble and has formed its first-ever trade group, the Vermont Lodging Association, whose members met virtually Monday afternoon with U.S. Rep. Peter Welch.

Welch was sympathetic to their concerns. He said he and the incoming Biden administration would support further relief in the weeks ahead.

"I've taken the position that the expenses everyone's had to incur to comply with Covid health requirements, they really should be borne by the federal government," Welch said.



Welch noted Monday was the first day to apply for assistance under the revived Paycheck Protection Program — part of the \$900 billion relief package signed by President Trump last month.

But short-term relief might not save some lodging properties across the region, even as other businesses start to recover in 2021.

Kim Donahue, proprietor of the Inn at the Round Barn in Waitsfield, said big-dollar bookings are often made a year or more ahead of time.

"So while other parts of the economy will open up and their cash flow immediately begins to remedy itself, ours will not because we'll still have that year or two year lead time," Donahue told Welch. "How can we not be forgotten when the picture turns rosier for other industries?"



In ski country, in what is normally a robust season for visitors from neighboring states, Josh Eckler at Trailside Inn in Killington said he recorded 15% of his normal weekend business. He, too, blamed strict state prohibitions on travel.



"I'm not saying, 'Open it up!' but how do we get some regional travel guidelines, like, for New England?" Eckler said to the congressman. "There doesn't seem to be a way to force the governors to get together (on this.)"

"I have no answer for that," Welch said.

Van Wees is hoping the new Vermont Lodging Association may find new influence in banding innkeepers together. The group has also hired former state lawmaker Patti Komline, now with Downs Rachlin Martin, to lobby on its behalf.

But any significant return of paying customers is still a guess.

"We do think Vermont's in a good position (for some 2021 recovery) because it's in a drive market and that will come back first," he said. "As long as travel restrictions ease."

Meantime, he said, he has a near-empty hotel and a \$425,000 Burlington property tax bill sitting on his desk.