

New voice in the lodging industry hopes to see interstate travel agreement

By Keith Whitcomb Jr. Staff Writer || The Rutland Herald || January 19, 2021

KILLINGTON — When the pandemic closed his inn back in March, Joshua Eckler began making phone calls. What he discovered was there were few places he could turn to.

“There really wasn’t a central group in the lodging world that was coordinating us together,” Eckler said. “We called our local chamber, but there wasn’t really a voice, no association, or anything like that.” Eckler has owned the Trailside Inn on Coffee House Road for nearly seven years. The past 10 months have been like a roller-coaster for him and his family, having to tell people who’d booked weddings at the inn about the pandemic restrictions.

Eckler began virtually attending the numerous meetings held by economic development groups and agencies, and it was at one of these that he learned about the Vermont Lodging Association.

“We were mountain biking at Kingdom Trails and I called them from the parking lot the next day and said how can I join, what’s going on, and how can I be active?” he said.

Over the past several months, Eckler said the group has gained traction and he hopes it will be a force for good in Vermont’s hotel and lodging industry, namely by helping the state understand the lodging industry through the pandemic.

“We need a fighting chance is what it is,” he said. “I don’t think we should be opening up completely and allowing everybody to come here, but there’s got to be some sort of balance. If we could do a little more business, we’ll need a lot less help down the road. We can’t survive at the current occupancy rates we’re seeing.”

The Vermont Lodging Association formed in 2020 in response to the pandemic and aims to work with the government and others to address the industry’s specific needs.

Hans van Wees, a VLA founder, said the organization came out of Gov. Phil Scott’s Restart Vermont task force initiative, which saw scores of business leaders around the state tapped to come together and help the state work through the pandemic. Those in the lodging industry who were part of that then formed the Vermont Lodging Coalition, which then merged with the Vermont Inn and Bed & Breakfast Association to form the VLA.

Van Wees said the group plans to advocate for the lodging industries interests, which he noted ties into the fortunes of many other businesses such as restaurants and other places reliant on tourists.

“We were not without representation altogether, the Vermont Chamber has always represented our industry over the years, but in this pandemic it became clear that we needed a very clear and specific voice because our industry was so disproportionately affected,” he said, adding that lodging operations have high fixed costs they must meet regardless of how many guests they serve. It will also take the industry a while to recover from cancelled bookings.

He estimates that the industry won't be caught up until 2023, and might even be dealing with a labor shortage as many housekeepers and chefs have left the state or the industry. One thing the VLA would like to see is some kind of agreement between northeastern states on travel restrictions. Many have felt that the current travel maps make little sense when one can travel from Burlington to Brattleboro with no problem, but people in Brattleboro need to quarantine if they travel half an hour away into New Hampshire. Eckler agrees.

“We really need to figure out how we can allow travel within the New England area,” he said. “The VLA can work with (the state) and try to come up with a way we can allow for travel, but really I think it's a governor to governor thing. We should be able to have the governor of New Hampshire and the governor of Massachusetts, and Scott get together and come up with rules on how we're going to travel and have balance in the system.”

He said this is more important than the lodging capacity restrictions. It's better to consistently fill your establishment at half capacity rather than have it completely open but no one booking reservations.

According to the VLA, its a volunteer drive, member-funded advocacy group that will provide advocacy for the industry as well as education and other resources for its members. As of last week, it had about 90 members.