

Hospitality leaders say federal COVID relief only way to prevent economic pain

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Business leaders in Milwaukee's hospitality industry urged the federal government to pass additional COVID-19 fiscal relief as the only way to prevent long-term pain to the local economy.

In a Milwaukee Press Club virtual event, hosted in partnership with WisPolitics.com, Rodney Ferguson, CEO and manager of Potawatomi Hotel & Casino, Omar Shaikh, restaurateur and VISIT Milwaukee chair, and Gary Witt, CEO of the Pabst Theater Group, all told viewers their businesses have seen substantial revenue loss this year compared to previous years.

Witt said his group has made only a little over 10 percent of the revenue this year that it made over the same period in 2019. He said he's laid off all part-time employees and about 25 percent of full-time workers, too.

He slammed bar owners who aren't following city occupancy limits and neighboring municipalities with only COVID-19 guidelines instead of regulations as partial reasons why the pandemic has stretched on.

"The difficulty is the federal government are the ones who turned us all into a 'Lord of the Flies' and 'Hunger Games' situation by not funding businesses that definitely need to be closed during a time when there is a pandemic," he said, placing the blame squarely on Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, and his

reluctance to spend additional federal dollars.

Ferguson and Shaikh agreed the industry needs financial help and the feds are the only ones who can do it in a meaningful way, but they spread the blame across all leadership in all branches of government instead of just McConnell.

Potawatomi currently operates with about 1,000 workers out of its traditionally 2,600-strong workforce, according to Ferguson. He added the hotel right now carries about 40 percent occupancy compared to the 95 percent occupancy it normally sees. And the casino has kept its table games closed as the virus spreads, leaving only slot machines available to patrons.

“They’ve got to come up with something sooner or later,” he said.

Shaikh, who partially owns the downtown Carnevor steakhouse, said his restaurant has only taken in about 60 percent of the revenue it did last year.

Carnevor still has strong business on the weekends, according to Shaikh, but weekdays are relatively empty and “you can’t survive on two days of revenue.”

“I don’t know whose fault it is, I just know they need to come together and figure out a way to somehow bail out our industry,” Shaikh said.

Congress in spring passed the \$2.2 trillion CARES ACT relief package, which is set to have much of its benefits expire by the end of the year without additional legislation.



Watch the virtual event: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9JMAAXPgu8>

-Royce Podeszwa

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