

Shuttered venues still waiting for federal relief

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— After more than a year without revenue, some shuttered entertainment venues could see federal relief dollars this week.

But others are still looking at a six-week wait or longer.

The Shuttered Venue Operators Grant was signed into law Dec. 27. The SBA opened up the application portal more than three months later on April 8, but it crashed on its opening day. Within 4.5 hours, the SBA took it down without accepting applications.

Wisconsin venues were finally able to apply for federal aid just two weeks ago.

“And now we continue to wait,” said Gary Witt, executive director of the Pabst Theater Group. “All this while we continue to wait related to news about opening processes in our state as we watch states and cities around us announce planned and strategized opening dates.”

The checks for the most needy venues — those that have lost 90 percent or more of their revenue over 2019 — are supposed to come within the next 14 days.

“At this point the delay is devastating, as the small businesses that Congress

intended to save are going under as they wait for the emergency relief,” Witt said. “More businesses are going to have to call it quits because they cannot hold out any longer, all the while \$16 billion is waiting to save them.”

T Presents is a music promoter based in Madison. The company is one of “a good portion” of promoters or live venues hoping to get a check this week or next, according to owner Toffer Christensen.

“Up north here, it’s been really really hard on businesses,” Christensen said of Wisconsin and its surrounding states. “There really haven’t been any opportunities until recently to try to get back open or do anything to kind of bring revenue in.”

He’s taken up opportunities to do shows in Florida and other places with relaxed COVID-19 restrictions since the beginning of the year. Pod shows — a pod of four who sit in a fenced-in area for an outdoor show — is one way that T Presents has been able to generate some revenue.

Christensen is also a partner at The Bur Oak, a Madison music venue. Both The Bur Oak and T Presents experienced a 90 percent revenue loss over 2019. Christensen applied for the Gov. Tony Evers shuttered venue grants to soften the blow, but it wasn’t enough to get his entities out of the “huge holes” of 2020.

“It’s kind of like a little Band-Aid for a short period of time,” he said. “Everyone is sitting around waiting for these SVOG grants to hopefully come through later this month or next month. That’s really what a lot of people are banking on to kind of make it through.”

Witt and Jason Anderson, the executive director of the Pablo Center at the Confluence in Eau Claire, helped found the National Independent Venue Association

in 2020. Anderson now serves as captain to the state of Wisconsin and is one of 38 captains in the country.

NIVA was a driving force behind the Shuttered Venues Operators Grant Program. But getting the money out has been a “moving goal post,” he said.

“The idea that you work for an entire year, you see no revenue in your industry, you finally get the attention of Congress to receive aid, and then it takes six months to administer that aid — that’s very disappointing,” Anderson said.

The Pablo Center opened in 2018 and is the largest venue of its kind in northwest Wisconsin hosting 400 live events annually and serving 135,000 guests in its second year of operation. But by the time it reopens to the public Oct. 1, it will have been shuttered as long as it has been open.

The center’s fixed expenses, such as rent and utilities, total around \$2.2 million annually. Without revenue, its strong donor base alone cannot cover those costs. The venue was able to take advantage of both the governor’s live entertainment and cultural arts and humanities grants. Those together totaled a half million dollars of federal CARES money to carry the center into 2021.

Despite the large figures the Pablo Center rings up, it is “priority three” on the SBA grant list, Anderson said. He said the center was just under a 70 percent loss. The shuttered venue grant dollars go out in tiers — those that lost 90 percent or more are first priority. Fourteen days later, venues that lost 70 percent or more of their revenue over 2019 get a check. After another two weeks a check goes out to venues that lost 50 percent or more.

The Pablo Center at the Confluence won’t see relief until near the end of June.

While Eau Claire's outdoor music festivals are planning to be alive and well this summer, indoor venues remain closed.

"We have over a dozen different styles of live entertainment venues," Anderson said. "Thankfully the state grant process, the cultural arts grants as well as the live entertainment venue grants, gave people enough cash to ensure that their landlords and other debt holders would give them some leniency, but I would say that patience is starting to wane in the hope of receiving SVOG funds and that those funds are going to be hypercritical in the survival of those organizations.

"And if they don't receive those funds, or they're declined, then we're going to see the loss of venues," he warned.

Anderson said he's grateful to the Evers administration for its fast action in getting CARES money to venues.

Christensen said the upcoming federal allocation of federal dollars to Evers is an opportunity for more venue grants. He's concerned that even the federal dollars won't be enough for small venues and businesses like his.

"I don't want to say it benefits larger venues and larger companies, but the way the math is set up, the more ticket sales you sold in 2019, the more money you make," he said. "And so if you're a small local venue like mine, like The Bur Oak, where we do a lot of local bands and really cheap ticket shows, the grant relief you're going to get is nowhere near what a larger venue is going to get and it's not going to help us as much as some people think we will."

Instead, Christensen is hoping NIVA can lobby for the governor to use his allocation of federal dollars to provide additional relief for smaller venues "who aren't getting

million dollar checks.”

Meanwhile, Anderson sees an opportunity for the state to invest in the creative economy ahead of another Roaring '20s.

“Wisconsin has led the way in art funding as well as grant funding during COVID from the CARES funds,” he said. “It was the largest live entertainment venue grant that has passed so far. It’s the only reason we haven’t seen venues close in the state of Wisconsin is because of the proactive work of the governor and his office.”

But he noted that Wisconsin is ranked No. 49 in the country for arts funding above only Arizona, which has zero dollars budgeted for the creative economy.

“We spend 14 cents per capita, per person, on arts or the creative economy ... whereas Minnesota is first in the nation spending over \$7 a person,” he said. “It’s just really challenging to be undervalued when we know that we’re the third largest economic driver in the state of Wisconsin.”

This is as shows are picking up again — some just like “normal” for those who are fully vaccinated.

Christensen said while the summer music scene will feature mostly regional and local bands, the fall is looking busy for national tours.

“I think come the fall, September and onwards, you’ll see a lot of shows all over the place — in Madison, Milwaukee, all over the country,” he said. “It looks like it should be a pretty healthy touring season come fall if everyone is willing to actually go

back to the theaters and the clubs and see the shows.”

-By Stephanie Hoff

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