

It Hasn't Been Easy, But City Of Alton Remains Optimistic About Future After Pandemic Ends

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ALTON - It's been a tough time for almost every American city, suburb or small town during the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic, as life in general has been greatly disrupted while the pandemic continues. Economically and socially, the pandemic has definitely taken its toll.

However, once the pandemic finishes running its course, and things get back to some sense of normalcy, Alton's city leaders feel that their town will bounce back big, and are optimistic about the future.

When stay-at-home mandates being put in place March 17, and non-essential workers being told to stay home. Alton was prepared when the time came.

"As soon as the mandates happened, we started to, I guess, not close city down, but make sure we were safe," said Alton mayor Brant Walker. "All non-essential personnel, with the Infrastructure, or the technology infrastructure upgrades we've made, are able to work from home, As far as core functions, we are still functioning, which means we can still, during our council and committee meetings, you can dial in and listen to those meetings if you like. But the aldermen don't have to come in, department heads don't have to come in, and we have had no reduction in first responders, so our police and firemen are out there, and we're actually doing more. We're actually having more police on the street right now to get through this. So in case of emergencies, you can still get permitting, If there's a fire, we can still go out, if there's building or zoning, we can go out."

When it was being decided what businesses could stay open, and which ones couldn't It was the biggest problem that Walker and his assistants had to face.

"The biggest worries were for safety, and trying to define what was essential and what was non-essential,' Walker said. "We're still trying to figure out our way through that at this point. So a lot of the questions are safety concerns and health concerns. What should be open, and what shouldn't be open, how should we congregate, and a some of the things that came from the state in regards to, say, pick-up and curbside. And that changed to 'well, yeah, you can walk in and get it.' It was just actually a way of feeling out of how this looks as we progress through this crisis."

Unfortunately, social distancing rules and guidelines has also forced all city parks to be closed until further notice, leaving children without a place to play while not in school.

"We did a full shutdown of our parks to make sure we don't have kids congregating," Walker said.

The city's Buy Local, Shop Local campaign, which has been a big success for the downtown area, was also a casualty during this time, with many shops in the area forced to close, and it will leave a huge gap in the Alton economy.

"The Shop Local, Buy Local has been tremendous," Walker said. "However, the damage that's going to be done to our economy is horrific. I can't imagine what these business owners and employees are going through right now as these businesses close or try to maintain somewhat of service, but the economy, in just the last week, last two weeks, just over 10 million people filed for unemployment. It's going to be absolutely devastating to businesses and families, throughout not only Alton and the Riverbend, but throughout the nation. This is awful."

The tourism industry, in which Alton and the Riverbend area has many attractions for out-of-town visitors to see, will also be taking a major hit.

"You know, three weeks ago, none of us had any idea we would be in this situation," said Great Rivers and Routes Tourism Board President and CEO Brett Stawar. "And our world literally turned upside down. The tourism world sector of our entire region was the first one hit. We saw a lot of cancellations as we saw a lot of things going on, events being postponed, and the rest of the world not being able to get to us. So, tourism really took the first hit, and I think that we'll be one of the last sectors to recover as well. But the good news is that I do strongly believe that we will be able to recover. We're seeing markets in China starting to rebound. We know that we're right in the middle of the throes of it right now, and it's a desperate situation for so many different businesses that we help out, like restaurants to attractions to hotels. Many of them are closing, or have closed, many of them may not be on our landscape when things turn around, so we expect a different world, but I think it'll be a world where we can all learn from and embrace

And things at the tourism board have definitely changed since the start of the pandemic.

"You know, things at the Great Rivers Routes and Tourism Bureau has completely changed," Stawar said. "It was actually St. Patrick's Day, or a couple of days before when we all went remote. We had 11 employees who work with us, and no one is showing up to the office on a regular basis now. The Visitors Center is all virtual. We have a live chat version on the website, where people, during 9-5 can reach us and talk to us about are different things in the region open about are different things open in the region, is the Grafton ferry open, or are any of these things open, are any of these impacts going on with our restaurants, who is open for curbside and carry-out. And we're also doing team meetings and staff meetings via Zoom, and so may conference calls. So our life really has changed a lot, we know we're going to have to tighten our belts, and be here for our community when it's time to restart. But for now, we're just

trying to keep everyone moving forward, stay where they're at, stabilizing the economy that has been obliterated, and really trying to figure out our path forward. We're holding weekly conferences calls with our hotels; we're having a conference call next week with our attractions to really talk about when the time is right, how can we reboot, and how do we do this together."

And tourists and visitors in the local area are also being advised what is open, and what the locals can partake in.

"We're really talking to the people of Madison, Macoupin, Jersey, Calhoun, Greene counties," Stawar said, "telling them it's alright; here's the businesses that are open that we can go visit and order from online. There are virtual shopping opportunities on line as well. We've got a site dedicated to what stores can you support. Mississippi Mud Pottery, for instance, you can go on there, order some things now to help these businesses meet their bottom lines, and meet their rents that are due, and their other obligations to their business. We're also doing a campaign called Local Legends, one that we planned for some time ago, but is launching this week. For the next four weeks, we'll be introducing mini-documentaries on different things, like the creation of the Great River Road itself. We're going to talk about the Wildey Theatre (in Edwardsville), and the big Catsup Bottle (in Collinsville), and the Ariston Cafe on 66. These are going to be deeper dives into documentaries of about what really make up this region, and why we're such a special place."

And the Alton Main Street organization is also there to help support the businesses and shops that line Main Street, the small businesses that make up the lifeblood of the area.

"We at Alton Main Street work mainly with the locally owned and operated businesses," said Alton Main Street Executive Director Sara McGibany, "all the mom-and-pops in the downtown district, and we've been trying to stay in contact with everybody as much as possible. Right now, everybody is pretty much in the mode of operating however much they possibly can, virtually or online, or curbside, as much as that possibly goes. We have been doing everything we can to keep our eye out for any resources that are available to small businesses, whether it's grants or loans or foundations and things like that. So we are really just trying to be a resource for everybody to help them understand how they can stay afloat during these trying times."

And one of the things that McGibany and her organization tries to do is help the businesses make head and tails out of the various programs and loans, to see which program best fits a particular business.

"At this point, some of the biggest obstacles for small businesses are actually trying to make sense of all the programs that are out there," McGibany said. "They've been

describing it as trying to drink out of a fire hose; there are lots of programs and such that have been announced, but they're trying to figure out whether they qualify, how to apply, how to gather all the documents for their application, and that sort of thing. So we've been standing by, just being able to connect them so some resources to help them walk through the process."

It's currently the slow time of the season on Main Street, where not much is going on during this time, so many of the Main Street events either haven't yet been postponed, cancelled or displaced, and the organization is taking a proactive stance whenever an event is in jeopardy. And Main Street has organized a way for bartenders, waiters and waitresses, and coffee baristas to be remembered during this troubled time.

"We are in somewhat of a slow time of our season," McGibany said, "so not a whole lot of our things have been postponed or displaced, yet. We're trying to move virtually whenever possible, so we have moved the city-wide clean up to an online version, and that is taking off; we're excited about that. We'll probably have the most successful one ever, because people are able to work on it over a whole month instead of just one day. We have also started on our Facebook page a way to tip your servers and bartenders and baristas in town when you serve yourself a meal or a drink at home, to remember that those in the service industry are really some of the hardest hit out of all this. So please check out our Alton Main Street Facebook page, and tip your bartenders and waitresses and people who serve you your coffee, and things like that.

We know everyone has their favorite people in the service industry," McGibany continued, "so we wanted to provide some sort of a platform for people to still be able to support them during this time."

McGibany also gave a shout-out to the Rivers and Routes bureau for doing a tremendous job in keeping a COVID-19 resource page going, along with the Riverbend Growth Association, where the group's Facebook page is always updated with event that are still going on in the area.

"Hats off to the Rivers and Routes Tourism Bureau," McGibany said. "They are doing a great job keeping a COVID-19 resource page going. Also to the Riverbend Growth Association; they have a great Riverbend updates Facebook group, where you can get all of the in and outs of everything that's going on all across the entire region, as far as businesses having to adjust to this crisis."

And McGibany does know one of the major secrets of any business' success in the area, and her positive and kind words can't help but inspire anyone.

"If there's anything we know about businesses in Alton, they are definitely persistent, and they are resilient," McGibany said. "So we just remind everybody that this too shall pass, hang in there, and keep an eye out for any of the programs that you're eligible for, and lean on your community for anything that you need in this time to help see you through. We will all get through this together, and we'll see everybody on the other side!"

Stawar knows that it's pretty tough sledding right now, and with new challenges brings new opportunity, and when the crisis ends, change is all but inevitable.

"You know, it is really tough right now," Stawar said. "We don't know what tomorrow's going to bring. Every day brings a new set of challenges, but it also brings another opportunity. One of the ways we can help is build this destination into something that it wasn't before. And it's all gonna change after this is over, and really looking into what can we do to make it better, and it will get better. We've got some inspirational stories of businesses that are really stepping up to the plate to make what they do better, that are helping out the frontline emergency workers, or the fire departments or the police departments, and the people actually having to work --- the grocery store people, even The Home Depot and the hardware stores, they're all really frontline of that. So I think we're gonna get through this; I know we're gonna get through this, and it's going to be a better place. It is going to have to be a time where we're going to have to reconnect and open up a new chapter to the Great Rivers and Routes, and to Alton.

Mayor Walker encouraged citizens to call with any projects they may have, but to understand that permitting is on an emergency basis only at this time. He also encouraged parents to keep their kids home in order to stand by the state's stay-at-home mandates.

"Just feel free to call in," Walker said. "We're working with permitting right now, If it's an emergency basis, we can still do permitting, so you can, if you need to, keep projects moving forward, but we're operating strictly on emergencies only, so if you don't need to do it, don't do it. I need one message I need to get out: Parents, please start stepping up. One of the biggest problems we have are kids just roaming around. Please keep your kids at home. I don't know what you possibly need to take this seriously. Parents, step up, keep your kids at home. If you don't need to go out, don't go out. We will get through this together; it will not be easy to get through it.

"This city is resilient, and together, we will get through it. So it's going to be a matter of time. Hopefully, when this is over, our employment numbers will go back as quickly as

they have spiked right now. So everybody, hang in there, stay close to your loved ones, well, not stay close to your loved ones, but be in contact with your older folks in your family, keep social distancing, but we will get through this."



[Charles Thomas also contributed to this story.](#)