

# **Downtown Alton Businesses Feel Impact Of COVID-19, But Remain Optimistic For Pandemic End, Future**

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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ALTON - As in all cities and towns in both Illinois and across the country, Alton has been hit very hard by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many businesses and shops in the downtown area – as well as the city itself – are facing major revenue shortfalls because of closures and other restrictions because of the pandemic itself. Tax revenues for the City of Alton are way down after the closing until now of Argosy Casino and other businesses with limited options.

In Downtown Alton itself, many bars, restaurants and small businesses are feeling the pinch of the pandemic, and things have certainly been very difficult for the local area as the pandemic started in March 2020 after a very promising start to the calendar year, and has lasted into the start of 2021.

"You want to talk about the best of times and the worst of times," said Alton Mayor Brant Walker. "Last year, we were coming off a high, and we were lined up to have one of the best years the city has ever seen in decades. Then, we had the pandemic, which has put the brakes on everything. It's been terribly challenging for the city, but also, my heart goes out to, because the small business owners, which we have a ton of small business owners in the community that has been tremendously adversely impacted, both from a business standpoint, from an employment standpoint.

"I just can't imagine what they go through at night. Coming from a small business background coming to mayor, I can feel their pain, and it's just got to be excruciating. As our numbers are down, I've been trying to figure our budget out, which is a gamble right now. How do you know what your budget will be when March, April, May and June, you were pretty much completely locked down."



Mayor Walker continued: "Alton is a community that relies heavily on retail, which would be our restaurant industry, our shopping. We also have casino gaming, which is big for our community, and it was completely closed until July, and then, it was kind of open, and then we got set back again. So trying to guess what our numbers are is very, very difficult.

"I can tell you we offered early retirement, and I believe we're down about 19 employees, and this is a city that does not have a lot of employees currently, and to operate with 19 less is going to be more stressful on our community to provide current levels of service. It's going to be difficult."

As much difficulty the city has faced during the pandemic, the businesses have faced the same, if not more difficulties as well.

"We shut down in March, just right before the St. Patrick's Day street closure and celebration," said Mary Morrison, a co-owner of Morrison's Irish Pub, "which is one of our biggest things that carry us through any kind of a flood. Unfortunately, the pandemic, compared to the flood, has lasted a long time. We've had some long floods, but this has been going on a lot. Challenges have been great, but so have people been stepping up to assist with those challenges.

"As a business, at first, in the summer, we did maybe 50 percent of what we normally did, and then as winter hit, it started going to about 35 percent of what we would normally bring in through the week. Extremely challenging to keep people employed; you have to put more people on, you have to use, when you're following the guidelines, we're using all disposables. All of these things add expense, not take away, and you're bringing in less income. So that's been really challenging.

"But there's been a bright side to how different people and places have stepped up. The city of Alton closing the street in front of us, allowing us to have tents out there, and do a semi-permanent structure so we could heat it. We can put tables distanced out there; that's been huge. Our employees stepping up in the beginning, every day, carrying things in and out, day in and day out before we had the semi-permanent structure.

"Regulars, customers stepped up. We couldn't find overhead heaters, so there was a scramble for all that kind of stuff. We actually have customers, who I call friends, who have stepped up and actually tried to help us out. They actually purchased some heaters and helped us stay in business. So, a mixed bag. I've seen some good things, but I can also say as far as the pub, and financially, it has brought us to our knees, absolutely, more than any flood has in the past."

The different times where the businesses have been open, then forced to close due to how the pandemic has progressed in different parts of the state, has made things difficult for the businesses as well.

"It's been a very challenging year," said Glenn Beaubien, a co-owner of the State Street Market. "Especially with, in our state, the governor (J.B. Pritzker) changing the rules, and allowing dine-in, not allowing dine-in, allowing dine-in at limited capacity. So, it's just been a rollercoaster of trying to figure out what works, and how we stay afloat, really."

Beaubien gave credit to the local mayors for helping the businesses in their communities try to remain open and serving their customers.

"I would say that our local mayors within Alton, Godfrey and Grafton are a little bit more people-focused on the businesses that actually generate revenue," Beaubien said, "and help keep businesses alive in their towns. So that's been super supportive, for sure."

With vaccines now becoming more readily available to the public, Beaubien is favoring a more aggressive approach to the reopening of businesses as soon as possible.

"I don't think we can sit back and wait for the next step," Beaubien said. "I would say with the vaccines starting to occur, it's going to give some people a comfort level. Winter's always a slow time, so we've just got to kind of ride this out, and then, as spring approaches, then I think we're pretty optimistic about things picking back up, and having a much better year than last year, that's for sure."

Terri Beaubien, who's also a co-owner of Morrison's, wants her customers to know that they're appreciated, no matter what the circumstances are.

"We want to make sure that people understand that we appreciate all of them," Terri Beaubien said, "and absolutely respect their choices of what they're making right now when it comes to dining. Some want to come in, some want to sit outside, some want to do curbside, some aren't doing anything for the time being. And we absolutely respect any of their choices. People apologize all the time for not coming out to eat. We get it. And we respect that. We're anxious to have them all back after the vaccine hits, but we certainly understand that people have choices right now on their dining experiences."

The anxiety and nervousness that both the restaurants and customers are still feeling isn't lost on Walker.

"I think the biggest problem has been not only the events, and how much fun and entertainment they bring," Walker said. "but also the anxiety of what people are so far out of what they normally expect, or what is the norm, and people not knowing what to expect, has driven a kind of a frustration level, and anxiety level. The business owners are also operating under those types of guidelines too. Are they open this week, or are they closed next week? Do I invest in my business now, or do I open a new business? Do I repair something, or do I wait? it's like you're in this weird kind of position where you don't know what to do, so sometimes, you don't do anything, because you're not really sure what to do. So it's been frustrating from I'm sure a small business owner, or a business owner's perspective. A citizen that has been locked down."

Walker also expressed his sympathies to the youth of the community, especially with them having things in high school that previously having been taken for granted, such as sports, the prom, and other activities, being taken away through no fault of their own.

"Kids --- I can't imagine being a senior last year, this year in high school, for example," Walker said, "and not being able to have graduation, not being able to play your senior year, or whatever it is, not having homecomings, all those cool things that come with normal day-to-day from now been ripped out from under you. It's really sad."

The biggest thing that's been missed from the businesses is the sense of community and friendship that's so important to people in everyday life.

"The biggest thing I think we miss is having the presence of community," Morrison said, "and being able to be close with people. You know, a pub is based on being a community place, and to not have people inside of here, to not be able to sit close, to not be able to hold deep conversations, not be able to hug each other. Those are what we miss the most. The banter, the harassing, all the good things that come with family and friends."

Despite all the problems going on at this time, Walker feels that the Alton community will come out of the pandemic even stronger in the community, and things will be getting better soon.

"This is not the first time this area's had a downtime," Walker said. "this won't be the last time we have downtime. If last year didn't teach us anything, how we come together during an epic flood, the number two flood we've ever had. The community pulled together, we beat that flood."

"We won the Small Business Revolution. You'll never see a community like Alton that I've ever lived in that pulls together the way we do when we get through things. So, there's no doubt in my mind that we are hitting a rough patch, but there's no doubt in my mind that we'll come through it even stronger, together."



