

By [Logan Brandon](#) • Sports Editor • August 7, 2020

[Share](#) [Tweet](#)

Business as unusual: Troubled waters for local venues

The current state of Yamhill County's venue industry is succinctly summarized by Rhiannon Porter, business manager of The Water Oasis, an outdoor wedding and event center in Newberg.

"We're walking a tightrope of being ethically responsible and not going bankrupt," she said.

Such is the peril facing the county's numerous wedding, graduation and party destinations.

Venues such as the McMinnville Grand Ballroom, The Bindery and The Honeycomb, which hosts gatherings in a former chapel, are approaching COVID-19 with care, trying to balance their customers' needs while fighting for their financial lives.

"It's been really tough, but we want to do what's right by our clients while also running our business," Porter said.

The Water Oasis originally had 85 bookings in March, but that number slowly evaporated as patrons cancelled or rescheduled. It has hosted only 11 of those celebrations, and losses have so far exceeded \$150,000, she said.



Marcus Larson/News-Register

The Water Oasis in Newberg is among the Yamhill County venues affected by a loss of business during the pandemic.



Marcus Larson/News-Register

The Honeycomb in McMinnville opened in November and owner Melissa Pope was looking forward to the summer wedding season, but lost most of her bookings during the pandemic.

Related Articles

- Free COVID-19 testing on Tuesday in McMinnville
- County COVID-19 cases top 400
- Special session: Oregon lawmakers return on Monday to big deficit, police questions
- From Amity to Yamhill: Here's how & when schools will start the fall semester
- County commissioners prioritize project list amid pandemic woes
- Two more COVID-19 deaths reported in Yamhill County

she said.

The Live Events Industry of Oregon has been working to raise awareness for the venue industry, especially its financial woes during the pandemic, Porter said.

The group lobbies for legislation at the state and federal levels that would offer financial assistance to event venues, business owners, proprietors, contractors and their employees.

Economic uncertainty remains as the state rolls out reopening and then dials it back as cases of COVID-19 surge. Customers feel unsure amid the pandemic, unable to know just how many guests state rules will allow at a future date.

“In Phase Two, we can socially distance and still offer up to 100 people in our location, but our clients have been very hesitant,” Porter said. “Kindness goes a long way — we want to talk to our customers. We can bring a sense of calm to this situation.”

Unfortunately, even the most accommodating venues in Yamhill County are wrestling with the uncertain economic environment.

The Grand Ballroom’s future is in flux as Harvest Fresh’s current lease on the building ends this month. General manager Jan Amerson said the owner will once again operate the event space, and she will continue managing clients throughout the transition.

The pandemic has limited the ballroom, which can seat 250, to a single event since March — a 30-person wedding in late July. Willamina High School’s prom, a Linfield sorority dance and several nonprofit events were all scrubbed.

“Everyone has canceled,” Amerson said. “Our regular city and county events aren’t scheduled. People are already cancelling events in September and October.”

The Grand Ballroom management team embraced a full-refund policy. “Normally, we don’t do refunds, but this is out of our clients’ control. We’ve probably lost \$7,500 in total,” Amerson said.

Porter and her team have offered some refunds, and switched some events with no extra charges.

“We have given partial refunds and even some full refunds if they reschedule to a later date on our calendar,”



Marcus Larson/News-Register

The Bindery event space in McMinnville has seen cancellations and postponements as customers coped with size limitations on events, owner Chelsey Nichol said.

“I want our clients to know we are following all guidelines as best we can. We are willing to work with the limitations we have.”

Chelsey Nichol, The Bindery’s owner, agrees with sentiments on balancing customer needs and the financial hit event spaces are facing.

In the first few months of the pandemic, clients calmly canceled and postponed events. As the state’s limitations on group sizes wavered, “our clients were beginning to get angrier,” said Nichol, a member of the Bladine family that owns the News-Register.

Public quarrels between businesses like McMinnville’s Youngberg Hill and disgruntled wedding clients attracted out-of-county media attention. Five couples shared their stories regarding Youngberg and manager and owner Nicolette Bailey’s negotiations with them.

Some couples said they lost several thousands of dollars, but Bailey told KGW in an interview that she tried to be flexible.

Nichol highlighted Youngberg’s situation when discussing The Bindery’s policies amid COVID-19.

“I think people need to realize the unique challenge facing venues. We rely on deposits, and specific contracts will outline refunding and non-refundable issues. We had clients who wanted their deposits back, even when our contracts cover Acts of God and government restrictions,” she said.

“People are getting more threatening toward venues,” she said. “It’s emotionally draining on small business owners who rely on deposits to make rent and pay back loans.”

Still, Nichol does what she can. She has offered micro-wedding packages and small group discounts. Sheridan High School, which planned its prom at The Bindery, received a refund.

The economic downturn is unavoidable, she said.

“I’ve been devoting so much time to making sure my venue is following Phase Two guidelines. I also have to ensure my vendors are following guidelines. I’ve had to hire new staff members in order to enforce social distancing, then I have to absorb those increased costs,” she said.

Honeycomb owner Melissa Pope hopes to ride out the pandemic and work full time again next summer. After opening her venue in November, she’d planned for a profitable wedding season, but has hosted only one gathering since spring, a 10-person wedding in mid-June.

“Business has come to a halt,” Pope said. “No one is going to book a wedding this summer.”

In total, she rescheduled 12 weddings. Clients paid a 50% deposit to reserve their dates, and no one has asked for a refund yet, Pope said.

She is concentrating on safety precautions to keep customers healthy.

The Honeycomb limits ceremony sizes, enforces social distancing and there was no food at the June wedding, an effort to help limit the potential spread of COVID-19.

Some venues, such as Stoller Family Estate in Dayton, are going beyond the expected to protect customer safety.

Employees regularly practice exercises and mock events to best highlight areas of concern in social distancing, said Michelle Kaufman, a spokesperson for the venue.

“Our employees will ‘play’ guests and go through a walkthrough of events. We can identify traffic patterns and test our social distancing,” she said.

Stoller has shifted its private events to reservation only, per COVID-19 guidelines. Most of the winery’s smaller parties have been postponed, with Kaufman noting, “People understand the situation.”

Stoller’s management is working with Oregon’s various coronavirus task forces in an effort to develop a workable plan.

“No one knows what the future holds, but in Oregon, we pride ourselves on community and helping one another,” said.