

# Summer in full swing with Florence's reopening

Restaurants, businesses report on first weeks beyond pandemic restrictions

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July 14, 2021 — The Florence area has hit the ground running, re-opening to visitors across the West Coast and others from Georgia, Texas, Pennsylvania and more. Since Oregon Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) lifted COVID-19 masks and physical distancing mandates on July 30 following Gov. Kate Brown's executive order, the Florence area has seen big changes. This kicked off with the Fourth of July weekend, which kept businesses busy and required them to be ready for the coming months.

Last June, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) recorded its first COVID-19 case in Florence. As cases increased, the City of Florence allowed alternatives such as extended parking plans for Historic Old Town, giving local restaurant owners outdoor seating on the street. Some of those remain standing today.

Now, OHA confirmed 70% of Oregon adults are vaccinated. The growth in vaccinations has paved a way in authorizing the Siuslaw Region to slowly transform back into what it was before the pandemic for local businesses and events.

Though challenges like staff shortages have persisted on a state-wide level, business owners in Florence have resorted to new systems of work, allowing

room for more visitors, vendors, volunteers and business. Florence is awakening, and the community can feel it too.

Public services and events like the Florence Farmers Market and the Siuslaw Public Library are a few stops amongst many for local residents. In May, the Florence Farmers Market recorded 335 shoppers and is currently counting an average of 500 shoppers a week. More recently, the headcount was at 562 in early July, according to Britte Kirsch, the volunteer coordinator for the Florence Farmers Market.

“The increase in attendance can be attributed to the availability of more products, especially more veggies and produce, as well as people getting out more now that we have the restrictions lifted,” Kirsch said.

At the Siuslaw Public Library, computers along with study rooms and indoor seating became available when COVID-19 regulations were lifted on June 30.

After closing to the public last summer and operating with curbside pick-up, the library has noticed more kids and families coming in, reported Erin Gordenier, the Siuslaw Public Library Outreach Librarian and Volunteer Coordinator. They now have 10 volunteers back in the building, shelving books, processing new materials and more.

Gordenier said the library is in the middle of summer reading for all ages, and kids are welcome to stop by and grab a free book with their package.

“We've got weekly activities, so it's been great to see more of our community able to come into the library every day,” she said.

Outside of the farmers market and the library, local businesses have experienced Florence's re-opening in full swing as of spring, and an uptick this summer, especially after the Fourth of July.

Kady Sneddon is the owner of Nosh Eatery, located on Bay Street in Historic Old Town Florence. Due to her number of staff, she has had to adjust restaurant hours, along with higher pay rates to accommodate her employees.

“We have a really small crew. We’re only four days this summer, open Wednesday through Saturday,” she said. “I’m already running my staff up to overtime.”

For Sneddon, the business has remained steady since last summer. With Florence’s re-opening, the biggest changes she’s noticed are busier weekdays compared to previous years, which have made up for days she’s had to close.

“Wednesdays and Thursdays are crazy,” she said. “This summer has been insane.”

Additionally, since officials have removed mask mandates, Sneddon said it has been “a lot of stress off of the staff.” Previously, her employees were asking customers to pull up masks, along with keeping track of vaccination cards.

“It was difficult to deal with,” she explained.

Her crew no longer faces these challenges, and Sneddon is looking forward to inviting people back in for indoor seating without worrying about customers going against the regulations.

“I’m just happy to have indoor seating, and I’m looking most forward to capacity being back,” she said. “We’re all in it together.”

With this summer’s reopening, Sneddon is determined to make a debut to restore their financial losses from closed days. Amidst the busy season, Nosh works hard to welcome community members and visitors back in, she adds.

At Restobar, located further down Bay Street, co-owner Kurt Hargens said he’s had to adjust his hours and pay higher rates, too.

"We're paying overtime to keep the doors open. Our hours used to be open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., but we're open noon to 8 p.m. now. I figured that was a good way to try and slow things down," he said. "It's more about trying to get through the business day and make sure my employees are happy."

Last summer, Hargens said Restobar was partially open for indoor seating and mostly takeout orders. More recently, he's said they're working with hundreds of customers a day, which has been a big shift since last year. Historically, the Fourth of July has been one of Restobar's busiest weekends, and Florence proved that once again.

"It's continually been really good, and busy ever since," he adds.

For both restaurateurs, a highlight of Florence's re-opening is having barstool seating again.

"The fact that the barstools are back gives an overall lift. It's like, 'Alright, we're past all this.' That's a good feeling for everybody more than anything," Hargens said. "It's exciting that we're sort of back to normal, but for the most part, I think we all have our heads down just trying to get through this."

Outside of Old Town, Darla Hague, owner of Sandland Adventures said reservations and planning have increased more than ever — even topping numbers from before the pandemic.

Compared to last summer, Hague said Sandland Adventures is seeing more than double the headcount in customers.

"We usually see people from all over the world, but we're seeing a ton more local traffic in neighboring states from Idaho, Washington, California, Montana and Arizona this year," she said.

When masks were required, Hague said she missed seeing people's expressions. Since regulations were lifted, she enjoys working more and is ready to tackle this summer alongside her husband and staff.

"It's kind of our reward. To be able to see somebody, you know the expression and if they're having fun or not," she said. "As a fun center, we love to see smiling faces. I think it's great people are getting out finally enjoying life and breathing air."

As the community transitions from pandemic restrictions, local businesses emphasized the importance of moving towards the future by working together, championing resilience and teamwork along the way.