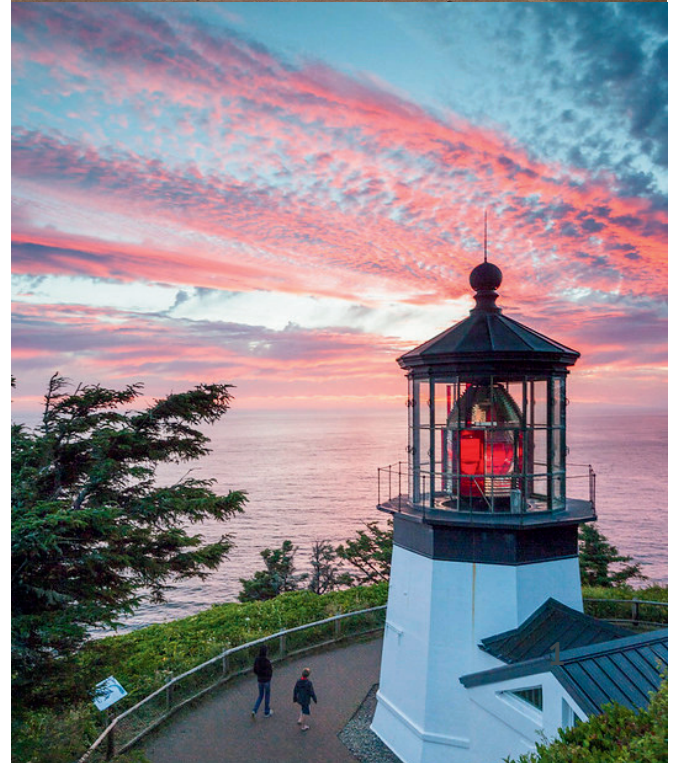




"Here's What We're Thinking"

A report on the **concerns of tourism sector businesses** in Tillamook County and what can be done to mitigate them.

June 2025



This is the third tourism sector report conducted by Tillamook Coast Visitors Association. The first was done in 2020 during the COVID pandemic. The goal for that report was to determine what local tourism businesses were doing to stay in operation and prevent permanent closure.

The second report was done in early 2021 to see how businesses were functioning one year into the pandemic.

Four years later, with so many disruptors happening at the federal level, we wanted to know how our local businesses, all individually owned, expected to fare in the coming years.

Interviews were conducted with the promise of anonymity. Answers were compiled, with quotes called-out that represented overall input.

We asked the following questions of each of 30 tourism sector businesses:

1. What keeps you up at night?
2. What are your future plans for growth or change?
3. Did the COVID experience cause you to change your business model long-term?
4. What preparations are you making, if any, for an economic downturn?
5. How do you market your business?
6. How do staffing issues affect your business and how do you address them?
7. How does housing availability affect your business and how do you address it?
8. How does Tillamook County or your city help your business, and what would you like to see?
9. How does the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association help, and what would you like to see more of?



INTRODUCTION

The year 2025 got underway with big changes in the national scene that began trickling down to Tillamook County – shifting tariffs, strained relations with Canada, talk of shuttering the Federal Emergency Management Agency, cancellation of grant funding, questions about the direction of the economy, and much more.

Those issues came on top of the usual worries for those who depend on Tillamook County tourism: Will I find housing for staff? Will visitors have much disposable income? Will staffing be available? Will the roads hold up? Will there be enough revenue in tourist season to get through the winter?

The Tillamook Coast Visitors Association reached out to ask about the experiences and expectations of local providers in five sectors of the tourism economy:

- (1) farms /fisheries/agritourism
- (2) museums and cultural heritage
- (3) retailers
- (4) restaurants
- (5) lodging

With the mix of optimism and realism that is required to stake a livelihood on tourism-dependent industries in a seasonal location isolated by the Coast Range, here is what these Tillamook County business operators had to say.

Thank you to writer Scott Gilbert for his professional-level interviews and reporting. He has conducted all three tourism sector studies for TCVA.

Farms/Fisheries/Agritourism Sector

What keeps you up at night?

In the 120 centuries since an unknown Mesopotamian had the idea to put seeds in the ground and wait, farmers have worried about weather, and weather was still the most common concern mentioned by those who extract raw foodstuffs from Tillamook County's fields and fisheries. But they had some decidedly 21st-century concerns as well. "Highway 6 is about to fall off the face of the earth," said a farmer and agritourism provider who worries about tourist access. Government regulations that the long-ago Mesopotamian never imagined cause anxiety for modern-day fishers and farmers, who face unpredictable limits on fishing and potential loss of farmland under FEMA's "retreat and restore" approach. Difficulty finding and keeping workers was top of mind for some interviewees, but not for all.

"The agricultural industry has been in a downturn for two or three years. Farmers tend to start showing a downturn first."

Farmer and agritourism provider

What are your future plans for growth or change?

Future plans for farmers and fishers broke two ways — expansion strategies or exit strategies, depending on age. One farmer with a retail produce operation is creating a commercial kitchen and processing facility. A business catering to anglers is adding an e-commerce operation. A farm offering agritourism is improving its fences and gates to better control the visitor experience and is also adding a manure composting unit. One fisherman is making plans to offer prepared food, while a charter operator is stepping up online recruiting of customers. People making exit strategies typically were keeping future generations in mind, such as a charter business offering private financing to sell its boats to its crew, a longtime dory fisherman mentoring his deckhand to start his own business, and a flower grower delaying retirement to keep business options open for his daughter.

Did the COVID experience cause you to change your business model long-term?

"No" was the standard answer from farmers with agritourism or retail operations and some of the fishers, but others reported various changes in how they do business after COVID. "I'm running very lean and mean now," said a commercial fisherman who cut back to focus on his core business after previously expanding into other operations. A charter fishing business has kept the online check-in option for customers that began when COVID limited in-person transactions. A flower grower and supplier stepped up reliance on its own products and cut back on buying from others for resale. And one business with a fishing clientele reported a change that echoed reports from the hospitality industry — a new determination to stand up to bad behavior from rude or entitled customers.

What preparations are you making, if any, for an economic downturn?

"I'm very optimistic for the future," said one doryman who expects nothing worse than some economic volatility, and a flower grower said tariffs on South American flowers have boosted demand for his products, but other interviewees were not so bullish. A fishing guide who receives a pension and works part time as a commercial driver is ready to pivot to other types of boat excursions. Another business operator with a fishing clientele is working longer hours because of a decision not to staff up. A farmer and agritourism provider is belt-tightening and looking for ways to cut more costs, while noting that agriculture is already in a downturn. Other farmers and fishers note that they already are running so lean that they can't cut more, so they plan to remain frugal and aim to ride out whatever comes.

Farms/Fisheries/Agritourism Sector

How do you market your business?

When farmers and fishers were asked what they use for marketing, the answers again and again were social media, word of mouth, repeat business, individual websites, and Tillamook Coast Visitors Association promotions, such as the North Coast Food Trail. Several noted that paid advertising in traditional media had not been worth the money. One brick-and-mortar business buys Travel Oregon advertising to reach anglers attending an Idaho sportsman show but was otherwise frustrated by the spotty results of paid advertising. Facebook, which skews to an older demographic, was the dominant social-media platform used for marketing, with one charter fishing guide saying that young people who might be reached by other social-media apps “are not in the hunting and fishing community.”

How do staffing issues affect your business and how do you address them?

The impact of staffing issues varied widely in the farmers and fishers sector. A commercial fisher described lack of staffing as the most crucial problem hindering the business. At the other end of the scale, solo charter guides need no staffing, and one doryman said people come to him asking for jobs because “like my buddy said, it’s fishing, man, it’s fun.” Most responses were in the middle, with interviewees saying they have to pay well to keep turnover down among valued employees. Community members use connections to find and hire hard-working teenagers for seasonal work.

“Our deckhand would like to start his own business at some point. So we’re mentoring our own competition. It makes economic sense...it takes a team, and it takes a community.”

—Pacific City doryman

How does housing availability affect your business and how do you address it?

All farmer and fisher interviewees acknowledged the problems caused by a shortage of workforce housing in Tillamook County, with one exclaiming “oh, it’s atrocious” in response to a question about housing costs, but most were only able to keep staff who face high housing costs by paying them enough to stay. A small number provide housing or housing stipends for employees, but most are in the situation of the business person serving the fishing community who can only warn prospective workers from outside the area to secure housing before making a move — and who noted the painful irony that even the income from a low-wage job disqualifies workers from living in subsidized housing.

How does Tillamook County or your city help your business, and what would you like to see?

Opinions varied, but Tillamook County government generally fared poorly among farmers and fishers. Many said permitting processes for businesses and buildings are overlong, overpriced and over-complicated. In fact, one fisher and one farmer, in separate interviews and unaware of each other, said word-for-word about the county: “Leave me alone and get out of my way.” Some said they believe county officials care and share residents’ frustrations with red tape, but no one described any specific help. The current government of Rockaway Beach was praised as business-friendly, while Garibaldi got an E for effort in revitalization but complaints about the slowness of its permitting process as it emerges from a period of government chaos.

How does the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association help, and what would you like to see?

Remarks about the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association were overwhelmingly positive in the farming and fishing sector: “Great”; “I think they’re doing an exceptional job”; “Just keep up doing the great work”; “It’s been pretty cutting-edge”; “It’s doing stuff that’s so above and beyond.” Respondents described getting help with signage, receiving improvement grants, benefiting from promotion of the area, getting traffic from publications and, crucially, drawing desirable visitors. One farmer and agritourism provider said a marketing agency offered to advertise Tillamook County in front of millions of people, and he was pleased to quote the TCVA director’s response: “I don’t want it in front of millions of people, I want to get it in front of the right people.”

Museums/Cultural Heritage Sector

What keeps you up at night?

Perhaps unsurprisingly in an area known for its rain, wind, and humidity, the physical deterioration of buildings and exhibits kept some operators tossing and turning. Privately funded museums worried about how to keep the lights on and maintain a quality visitor experience, while public-sector facilities worried about the availability of funding and whether political upheaval might reduce visitor numbers. In South County, the reliance on an aging volunteer corps and the general decline of communities except for Pacific City drove some insomnia. The conflict between modern curation methods and local sentiment was a source of stress, and one museum operator broached the topic that is often unspoken but never forgotten: how the county will go forward after the big Cascadia quake finally occurs.

What are your future plans for growth or change?

The issue of volunteer reliance was a big factor in planning. Initiatives that depend on dwindling ranks of older volunteers typically said their goals were to hold steady or seek county investment, but facilities that are professionally staffed or led by a visionary often had big plans. Those to-do lists included: more social media presence, improved signage, expanded and updated exhibits, public meeting facilities, classes, additions to staff, adopting a storytelling approach, bringing in the history of recent decades, making thorough inventories, and collecting history as it happens. Public-sector facilities also weighed whether to seek taxpayer support for big-ticket maintenance projects on weather-battered buildings.

“It is a very tumultuous time right now, with huge challenges that keep me up at night. There are big cultural shifts in terms of how people think about history, how people think about museums, how people think about how we present that information in the modern era, that is evolving and causes its own versions of strife and difficulty.”

—Museum operator

Did the COVID experience cause you to change your business model long-term?

Changes from COVID were a mix of negative and positive. One museum noted that attendance and gift-shop spending have never recovered, and another museum got its current space because COVID forever crippled the business that previously owned it. Others said COVID brought more efficient operations as staff and board members have migrated to Zoom calls. More awareness of cleanliness and air quality was a common outcome of COVID. Some museums gained from COVID because staff left during the shutdown and freed up finances that put the facilities on better footing going forward. Several said they exercise more caution now with rainy-day funds, flexibility in planning, and what-if thinking.

What preparations are you making, if any, for an economic downturn?

No respondent was unprepared for this question, as anticipation of a downturn was widespread, but some see nothing they can do except brace to ride things out. “We’re not seeing any Canadians,” said one operator who is weighing whether a drop in tourist numbers would require a hike in admission prices. Others are stepping up grant requests and socking more money into savings to offset any drop in revenues. Facilities drawing on tax money were grateful that they would have a year to prepare for a decline in public funding due to the nature of tax collection and disbursement. Small, volunteer-driven organizations expected the least impact, since they typically operate on shoestring budgets already.

Museums/Cultural Heritage Sector

How do you market your business?

Again and again, the first answer was social media, primarily reaching the older demographics of Facebook and to a lesser extent Instagram. Respondents also marketed through their own websites, newsletters, Tillamook Coast Visitors Association channels such as Venture Coastward, the Headlight Herald's Discovery Guide and Almanac, brochures, rack cards, and a small amount of legacy print media advertising. One facility had developed a successful earned-media strategy, with news outlets developing stories from its press releases. Several respondents were pleased with financial and expert assistance for marketing that they received from the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association, and one cultural facility simply said its marketing strategy was directed by the TCVA.

How do staffing issues affect your business and how do you address them?

The small facilities made up of volunteers generally did not report staffing issues, but operations with multiple paid employees either had ongoing problems hiring people or were starting to have trouble finding seasonal workers for 2025. Everyone who reported trouble with staffing said it was inextricably connected to the cost of housing in a tight market. The museums that charge admission generally are low-priced, which is seen as part of their mission, but that strategy also limits their ability to attract employees who are facing the high costs of housing along the increasingly expensive coast.

How does housing availability affect your business and how do you address it?

Housing and staffing woes go hand-in-hand, as respondents said when asked about hiring problems. One small museum keeps a house where the secretary can stay, because as the director said, "If I had to hire someone paying rent, I couldn't afford them." A museum that strives to pay a living wage is in a bind because employees who do not qualify for low-income housing face a very limited and expensive rental market. That facility's need for degreed workers means its hires tend to come from outside the area, and start dates have to be flexible because the challenge of finding housing leads to delays.

***"When I hire someone, they ask: What's my start date? And I say:
Your start date is when you find housing."***

—Museum operator

How does Tillamook County or your city help your business, and what would you like to see?

In the museum sector, views of Tillamook County government varied, with some facilities describing an acceptable state of little interaction while others wished the county would step up with more spending. One enterprise hopes the county will come through with money for a scenic Nestucca River wayside, while another entity, facing a looming capital expense, hopes the tourism it draws will justify an influx of Transient Lodging Tax money. To the extent that cities were mentioned, Rockaway Beach drew praise for its Community Grant programs but other cities were generally described as uninvolved.

How does the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association help, and what would you like to see?

TCVA was a hit with the museum and cultural amenities crowd, with no complaints from interviewees. "They give us great support" with advertising and promotion, said one respondent, while another noted the organization's sustainable approach has helped lessen local opposition to tourism. The TCVA's grant programs and judicious spending of tax dollars were roundly praised, and one museum chief summed up the TCVA director's consideration of the varied stakeholders in the area as "a phenomenal job of trying to accommodate everyone."

Retail Sector

What keeps you up at night?

Retailers interviewed for this report all depend on tourism, and most of them said concerns about infrastructure top their lists of worries. Some focused on the poor condition of the roads connecting Tillamook County to the Willamette Valley, while others mentioned the uneven availability of facilities such as public restrooms. The increasing expense of visiting the coast and the high cost of housing both added to anxieties. Economic uncertainties rooted in politics, specifically the erratic imposition of tariffs, also made the roster as retailers fretted about losing customers if tariffs forced them to raise prices.

What are your future plans for growth or change?

There was no overriding theme among retailers as they made plans specific to their businesses. A seller and creator of gifts, accessories, art, and various indulgences planned to reduce the wholesale side of the business amid an expansion of retail space. A merchant offering sweets and beach goods is working on refining the product line based on customer feedback, and also has created a wide range of price points for goods to accommodate varying budgets and allow for more impulse purchases. One shop owner took advantage of added space by creating a calendar of events that are held on a frequent basis.

“I feel good about what I’m doing here in the community, and I think most other small business owners feel the same way.”

—Store owner

Did the COVID experience cause you to change your business model long-term?

Retailers reported little long-term change stemming from the COVID experience. One said supply-chain issues had taught the lesson of ordering more in-demand supplies when they’re available. Another ships more special orders to buyers now, while noting with appreciation that customers in her niche field avoided Amazon during the pandemic to keep small retailers alive and have continued to do so. An artist stopped traveling to shows and markets because having a shop was a godsend during the COVID restrictions. But a typical response to this question was “nothing changed permanently from that era.”

What preparations are you making, if any, for an economic downturn?

In interviews with five sectors of the Tillamook County tourism economy, retailers stood out for talking the most about plans for a downturn. One shop owner moved fast when tariff storms were brewing, securing multi-year contracts with vendors and stepping up the “made in America” focus. Some retailers added lower price points so visitors who are wary about spending could still make impulse purchases. One struggled with whether to stock up on expensive inventory that shoppers asked for or to shift toward lower-priced goods. While retailers had the most to say about a downturn, most were confident about getting through it. “People always have birthdays, and they always have anniversaries, and they always have weddings,” said one art seller. A competitor said her teaching skills would be in demand during a downturn, and she might sell more high-end goods because “the luxury market never suffers.”

How do you market your business?

Retailers varied widely in marketing, ranging from robust drum-beating across multiple social-media platforms and paid advertising to essentially no marketing. The most energetic marketer comes up with new photographs, video, and text each day across three social-media accounts and their subaccounts, while the other end of the scale is occupied by a seller of sweets and beach goods who has stayed busy despite not marketing in any consistent fashion. Another retailer who relies on Instagram found that staging events became so popular that it became necessary to hire a part-time events coordinator.

Retail Sector

How do staffing issues affect your business and how do you address them?

The retailers interviewed for this report generally run such small operations that staffing is not an issue — most of them operate with one helper or they hire local teenagers who live with parents. One store owner who needs multiple employees agreed with interviewees in other industries that staffing issues are part-and-parcel of the tight housing situation on the coast. “I actually helped one of my two main managers find housing,” she said. “That’s a very real thing. I have not provided the housing, but I have interceded to help facilitate the location of housing. And we have definitely had staffing issues.”

How does housing availability affect your business and how do you address it?

As with staffing, the retailers interviewed for this report were mostly too small for housing availability to affect their operations. The one merchant with a large enough operation to require multiple employees has had to be proactive in helping staffers find housing so they can work. Even small retailers, however, noted that the lack of affordable housing in Tillamook County generally acts as a brake on the tourism industry, and several of them mentioned that restaurateurs in particular are hindered by the shortage.

“I feel like there’s a whole bunch of people in Tillamook who just vote against, vote against, anything that’s going to potentially help or bring in more tourism. And then they complain on all the Facebook forums about how there’s nothing to do in downtown.”

—Store owner

How does Tillamook County or your city help your business, and what would you like to see?

Rockaway Beach was praised for its “incredible” grants to businesses, but otherwise this is where the going got rough for cities. The City of Tillamook was singled out for a beating by some interviewees, who blasted it for limiting downtown exteriors to a range of “boring” colors, tightly restricting signage, letting the city visually decline, and creating the impression that officials don’t care about tourism. Tillamook County was criticized for apparently being apathetic about tourism and for taking months to do building inspections, and Manzanita was seen as too distracted by various city issues to care about businesses.

How does the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association help, and what would you like to see?

TCVA got kudos for its efforts to market the area and help local merchants, with one Tillamook retailer saying the agency is “doing the work the city and chamber should be doing” to assist businesses that are smaller than the creamery. Some store owners gave high marks to the Venture Coastward guidebook, saying the ads there are a rare example of print ads that pay off. An art seller loved the treatment she got from TCVA, which hired a photographer for a feature on her shop and then let her keep the photos for her own marketing. One Rockaway Beach retailer wished TCVA’s social-media posts would spotlight specific businesses more, suggesting short videos that would take visitors on a walk-through of local shops.

Restaurant Sector

What keeps you up at night?

Compared to other sectors, dining providers had little unanimity when asked about their top worry. For some, the rising cost of food and other supplies was the biggest concern. For others, finding enough staff – tied inextricably to Tillamook County’s shortage of affordable housing – was top of mind. One restaurateur was troubled by talk of a new tax on dining, similar to the Transient Lodging Tax, being touted as a way to get tax revenue from day trippers. A restaurant owner in a city with multiple food trucks was hurting from a decline in sit-down customers. One worried about the lack of “housing and mental health resources for my staff,” and one rarity had no worries to report.

What are your future plans for growth or change?

Several restaurateurs reported expansion or renovation of their physical facilities, both in their kitchens and in outdoor areas where customers can dine or wait comfortably for tables. One eatery is taking over an adjacent retail space to expand its coffee shop. Several are implementing online ordering, and one restaurant facing competition from food trucks is also shifting to more expensive entrees in hopes of attracting a higher-end clientele. One is stepping up its merchandising while revamping its logo and website, and a restaurant that has an event space is leaning more heavily into that side of the business.

“Restaurants, to stay relevant, they have to be constantly reinventing themselves. They have to be following trends, they have to offer new things. And if you don’t have the staff to facilitate that, then you can’t do it.”

—Restaurateur

Did the COVID experience cause you to change your business model long-term?

Some dining providers reported no real change between pre-COVID and post-COVID operations, but most came out of the shutdowns with some lessons incorporated into their business approach. Some implemented merchandising of gift items that vacationers can take with them. One saw the need for human connection and added a long communal table. Others learned to be more nimble and prepare for the possibility that government might order sudden changes. And a number of dining providers – perhaps a surprising number – said customers were more entitled and rude after COVID, leading them to empower their staff to take a hard line with bad customers and eject them if needed.

What preparations are you making, if any, for an economic downturn?

By and large, restaurateurs seemed confident in their ability to adapt and survive a recession, though one older owner said a downturn would mean it’s time to retire. Some said an economic reversal is already here, and one said his business is four years into a downturn driven by brutal costs of operation, leading to hard decisions about staffing, wages, and inventory. One dining provider is ready to pivot to the off-season approach of lower-priced comfort food that will continue to support local farmers and fishers. But for many restaurateurs, their theme was like the song “I Will Survive,” with statements such as “I’m just playing it as it goes and will change as I need to” and “If you live your life based on ‘what if,’ then good luck with that – I’m not saying I’m fearless, but I don’t live in fear.”

How do you market your business?

Except for one large operation, restaurateurs reported spending little to no money on marketing, typically relying on their websites, word of mouth, Facebook, and the TCVA’s North Coast Food Trail. One restaurateur reported cutting back on social media because of concerns that even rare bad reviews can kick off a bandwagon of trolls. Another is stepping up email marketing and blogging. One takes a food cart to local events to get the owners and their logo in front of the public. Some place emphasis on community involvement and volunteering in ways that help schools and charities: as one restaurateur said, “They have a vested interest in us as much as we have a vested interest in them.”

Restaurant Sector

How do staffing issues affect your business and how do you address them?

Several interviewees noted the need to pay and treat employees well in order to keep enough workers, but even then some reported they have had to cut back services and hours when they could not stay adequately staffed. One had a tough assessment of hiring in a rural area, saying large issues such as low rates of educational achievement, high poverty, a lack of childcare, and food insecurity create chronic hiring challenges, and others said finding people with a solid work ethic is difficult. Some provide housing to keep employees, which can come with problems connected to Oregon's tenant-favoring laws, such as being unable to evict fired employees for periods that can take a year or more.

“Removing the culinary programs from our schools hurt the restaurant industry here in Tillamook County. In an area where tourism is such a large part of the economy, there should be programs that invest in promoting, educating, and encouraging our young people to become a part of the service industry.”

—Restaurateur

How does housing availability affect your business and how do you address it?

All interviewees acknowledged the impact of Tillamook County's shortage of affordable housing, which makes it harder for eateries to hire and keep employees. Several mentioned the Catch-22 situation in which paying employees a livable wage backfires by making them ineligible for income-qualified subsidized housing. Restaurateurs describe positions unfilled and hours not open because people they want to hire can't find places to live. Some owners provide living spaces to employees, which is a gamble under Oregon's laws weighted toward tenant rights. One restaurateur and local officeholder has voted in favor of apartment developments but admits they do not come near meeting demand. Some want tighter controls on the short-term rentals they say worsen the shortage of workforce housing.

How does Tillamook County or your city help your business, and what would you like to see?

Rockaway Beach got a shout-out from a restaurant owner who received a facade grant to improve the look of the weather-beaten building, but generally local governments did not fare well when appraised by restaurateurs. Some eatery owners cite a general distrust and lack of faith in local governments and say they just want to be left alone. One who got startup assistance from county entities appreciated the early help, but said businesses that struggle a few years later in the seasonal tourism economy could use financial and practical support that the county doesn't offer, and specifically mentioned a desire for aid to create better handicap accessibility. One restaurateur expressed a wish to convene with all three county commissioners to discuss business issues outside the setting of a formal public meeting.

How does the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association help, and what would you like to see?

The TCVA generally got high marks from restaurant owners, though one had the impression that the same eateries get promoted regularly. However, another restaurateur praised the TCVA for being fair, saying “They give all of the businesses and all of the restaurants and hotels an equal opportunity — they're not picking any favorites.” One owner said the TCVA director “has done a tremendous job in improving everybody's business on the coast,” and said about the director and agency “I think they're the best thing going for the tourism industry in this county.” One restaurateur had a concrete suggestion for the TCVA to help assemble a list of service providers for commercial kitchens, and to consider creating a “bulletin board” where restaurant servers could float between different establishments.

Lodging Sector

What keeps you up at night?

For one Tillamook-area operator, the city's shortage of restaurants and shops was a sleep-killer, while in North County, problems finding reliable employees and dealing with the ever-rising expenses of doing business led to tossing and turning. In unincorporated Pacific City, which has no municipal services, the burden of the Transient Lodging Tax and the fact that there's no equivalent tax for restaurants or fishermen bothered a lodging provider who expressed a desire to get out of the business and pointed to other nearby lodging properties where owners are trying to sell. Yet, a North County inn owner longed for childhood days on an empty coast, before the lodging industry changed it forever.

What are your future plans for growth or change?

A North County inn owner is using a marketing grant to fuel an increase in off-season visitors, although it will complicate the usual off-season repairs and deep cleans. An owner in Pacific City bluntly said future plans are to get out of Tillamook County, citing unhappiness with commissioners, lodging taxes, and a pervasive anti-tourist attitude, as illustrated by rules that caused the Reach The Beach bicycle fundraiser to abandon Pacific City as its finish line. A North County lodging operator is creating a more upscale experience for guests, saying the change is in line with industry trends. A Tillamook-area owner is expanding social-media strategy to boost business and express creativity.

Did the COVID experience cause you to change your business model long-term?

The answers to this question were a mix. Some said the COVID experience did not lead to any long-term changes in business practices. In the case of one lodging property, the lack of change was because the owners were already cleaning well above industry standards and continue to do so now, including regular ozone treatment of rooms. A North County operator kept some COVID-era practices for a while but is now undoing them, such as an option for guests who paid in full to sign a waiver online prior to a stay and arrive to find a key under the welcome mat outside the room. Now the keys are kept in coded boxes because guests were arriving and occupying rooms different from the ones they had rented. The owner also is keeping more money in the bank, after the painful experience of making big refunds. One owner reported becoming more skeptical overall and more determined to do independent homework.

***“We’re having cancellations from our Canadian friends.
Good friends who have been coming forever.”***

—Lodging provider

What preparations are you making, if any, for an economic downturn?

No one reported making recent preparations for a possible downturn. One inn owner said the preparation consists of work done in years past, such as giving guests an experience that results in good reviews and updating the property. Another owner had faith that the Oregon Coast is so spectacular that its tourism economy will be somewhat insulated from any downturn. A North County lodging operator is just paying bills and keeping an eye on income versus outgo, without making any strategic changes. One operator is staying hopeful and believing that resilience will be enough.

How do you market your business?

As was the case with all sectors in this report, lodging operators mentioned social media as a marketing tool, although their reliance on it varied. A North County owner of two properties noted that the two businesses' websites also are bringing in a lot of traffic. A Tillamook-area owner pays a contractor to run marketing efforts and says the investment has paid off in a higher engagement level. One North County owner admitted doing less marketing than desired due to being so busy as the sole manager of the property. But even with that caveat, the property has a presence in Tillamook Coast Visitors Association guides, on the TripAdvisor website, on Google, on social media platforms, and more.

Lodging Sector

How do staffing issues affect your business and how do you address them?

Some interviewees said difficulties in hiring and keeping staff are rooted in the shortage of affordable housing along the coast, but others said the problem isn't finding workers, but finding good workers. One lodging provider reported a general decline in the quality of staff, saying that for the first time ever there are problems with employees stealing and not taking their jobs seriously. Another lodging host didn't even buy into the affordable housing connection, saying that expecting seasonal labor to live in the expensive strip along the coast is silly. In this host's telling, the big problems with staffing boil down to poor work ethic, self-centered priorities, and widespread drug abuse.

“Staffing is an issue. I probably could hire someone very soon, but would I be guaranteed that they would show up, or that they would stay for when they’re supposed to, or that they would do what I would like?”

—Lodging provider

How does housing availability affect your business and how do you address it?

All interviewees had strong views on housing, but not unanimity. One pointed to obstacles that builders face in various jurisdictions, and described a situation in Bay City where plans to build tiny homes for workforce housing ran up against a city requirement for the developer to upgrade an entire existing street. A North County lodging provider strongly supports zoning that allows higher density, saying housing costs crimp the ability of workers to live in the area. A competitor emphasizes to job applicants that they should have stable housing in the area, and is frustrated by the fact that paying workers a decent wage makes them ineligible for subsidized housing. A South County host pooh-poohed the idea that housing costs are an issue, saying the focus should be on the poor habits of workers.

Do you use third-party booking sites?

Generally, lodging providers said they use third-party booking sites out of necessity, but nobody was a fan because of the costs. One said sites like Expedia and Travelocity are currently unavoidable because they have a chokehold on the market, but said moving toward repeat upscale clientele makes the sites less important. Another host called third-party sites a necessary evil to maximize bookings. However, a North County lodging provider has steered clear of third-party booking sites, saying room prices would have to rise to cover the costs, and the risk of overbooking is a common horror story among inn owners.

How does Tillamook County or your city help your business, and what would you like to see?

Except for Rockaway Beach, which was generally hailed as business-friendly and innovative for its grant programs by interviewees across tourism sectors, Tillamook County and its cities tended to fare poorly in the view of lodging providers. Garibaldi, the city of Tillamook, and Tillamook County were viewed as resistant to change, with overly complicated and costly bureaucracy. One Pacific City operator blasted the county for mulling an increase in the Transient Lodging Tax, saying the lodging sector is carrying too much of the burden while other sectors that benefit from tourism should have a tax like the TLT applied.

How does the Tillamook Coast Visitors Association help, and what would you like to see?

The TCVA got good reviews from most lodging providers, but a South County owner was an outlier. That host harshly criticized the TLT and said it should pay for things like lighting streets in tourist areas, while also blasting perceived favoritism toward the Kiwanda facilities. However, another operator said the TCVA director was very supportive in getting through the red tape for an Oceanside project and in leading the way to a Rockaway Beach grant. Another appreciated the TCVA director's help with talking points to market a business proposal. A North County host gave high marks to the TCVA for its grant work, both in grants it administers and facilitates.

What We Do to Help Tourism Businesses and Tourism-Related Nonprofits/Agencies

The funding TCVA receives from the county's Transient Lodging Tax fund is fully earmarked for projects that benefit the communities and the tourism industry. Even our personnel costs are tracked by the amount of time we dedicate to these projects.

As a community-based tourism organization, TCVA operates much differently than traditional tourism marketing organizations, which spend the majority of their time and funding on advertising - often with good reason. They have convention centers and thousands of hotel rooms to fill. Many cities on the Oregon Coast are entirely dependent on tourism. It takes a lot of money and effort to keep businesses and cities operating.

But for Tillamook County, that's not the way. TCVA is dedicated to protecting livability and our coastal environment while also helping keep our tourism businesses thriving year-round. Since 2014, shoulder- and off-season lodging revenues have increased 4X, as has lodging tax. That tax has been invested in tourism-related projects that add up to several million dollars, plus grants, which since 2015 now total \$7 million distributed throughout the county. Rockaway Beach and Manzanita also offer grants to tourism businesses.

For more information on grants, go to:
tillamookcoast.com/grants

If you want to hear how we approach community-based tourism, go to [YouTube.com/tillamookcoast](https://www.youtube.com/tillamookcoast)
Click on the video:

"Oregon's Tillamook Coast, a vision of sustainable, community-based tourism."



NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

What keeps me up at night?

I remember when I first heard about a virus outbreak in Washington State, one that was spreading rapidly in nursing and assisted living homes. It was January 2020. Something about that news report told me this was going to be bad. I immediately stopped all promotion and messaging. By March it was considered a pandemic. The county made the safe decision to shut down tourism businesses for 10 weeks to keep the virus from spreading here.

That's when my sleepless nights started. What could TCVA do to help our businesses stay in business? Our budget was cut drastically as a result of the pandemic, but we're a boots-on-the-ground organization. We got busy.

What I learned from those two years was that our tourism businesses are also boots-on-the-ground. Through a lot of hard work, they stayed in business. I'm in awe of them.

We face a different crisis now due to drastic changes at the federal level that could hurt our farmers, housing development, nonprofits, hospitality businesses and rural areas. I'm again staying awake at night thinking about how we can help.

One thing I know: our tourism businesses are tough. We'll make it through together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ron Dulin".



Tillamook Coast Visitors Association

