

# today's hotelier

May 2021 | todayshotelier.com

The Official Publication of AAHOA



**MICHAEL JACOBSON**  
*President & CEO  
Illinois Hotel & Lodging  
Association (IHLA)*

## Bouncing Back

Michael Jacobson offers insight on industry recovery

## Creating a Fiscal Fortress

Maintain financial security by keeping communication open with lenders

## The Road to Recovery Runs Through AAHOA

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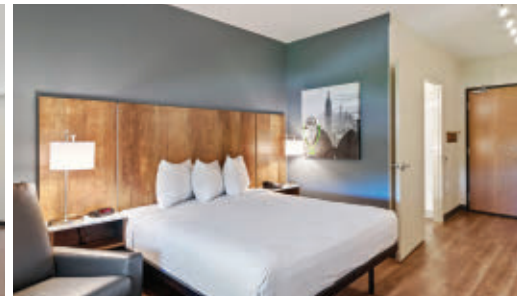
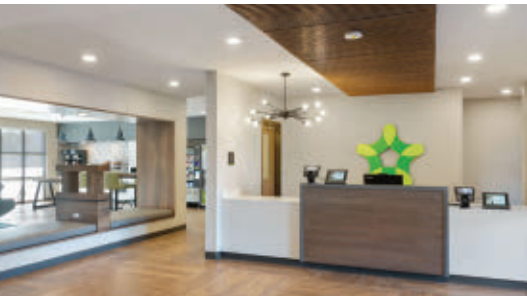
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**BIRAN PATEL**  
AAHOA CHAIRMAN (2020-2021)

## Tightened security makes for more open doors

“

In light of signs of recovery, AAHOA is strategically aligning our core association missions of education, advocacy, and networking with the growing needs and aspirations of America’s hoteliers.”

**A**AHOA IS WELL-POSITIONED TO REALIGN OUR RESOURCES, EVENTS, AND EDUCATIONAL offerings to confront the evolving realities of the pandemic. We are always in the process of developing plans to adjust to travel returning and business rebounding. In March, our industry began showing promising signs of recovery with occupancy rates and other metrics reaching pandemic highs. The vaccine rollout has proved highly successful in the past weeks as millions of Americans received COVID-19 vaccines and millions more became eligible under updated state guidelines. This is encouraging news heading into the summer season, and we will continue to do our part to get Americans traveling again in a safe and secure manner.

After a year of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, Americans are eager to get back on the road. Hoteliers bear the mantle of reaffirming public trust with safety and security measures on our properties. Since day one of the pandemic, we have shifted operations to accommodate social distancing guidelines and implement the best cleaning standards. The events of the past year battered our industry and tested our resolve, yet I am confident there are lessons learned that we can build upon moving forward.

The national concern for our health and safety, coupled with major disruptions to travel, have been central challenges to hoteliers. In the CARES Act, the landmark COVID-19 relief legislation passed in March of 2020, “Economic Security” served as the endcap of the legislation’s title, comprising the bulk of its provisions. The small business and economic disaster loans funded by this legislation continue to assist small businesses, yet they have a shelf life – even the Paycheck Protection Program is set to expire at the end of the month. AAHOA will continue to elevate the interests of hotel owners and advocate for sound public policy but know that federal relief will not be a mainstay in the long term. In the near future, we will be on the road to recovery on our own, which will require constant reevaluation of hotel operations and financing.

In the service industry, the safety and security of our guests and employees will always be a top priority. When looking at the guest experience moving forward, it will be critical to consider our guests’ pandemic behaviors and expectations. Maintaining trust with the consumer, especially considering the changing landscape of local restrictions and regulations, presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Hoteliers who can carry over the best practices guests have come to expect will be better positioned to capture their business. Hotel operations are always chasing a moving target to adapt to the “new normal,” and that can vary from hotel to hotel and market to market. Flexible, dynamic business plans have carried us to this point and will undoubtedly be vital to our future successes in a post-pandemic economy.

In light of signs of recovery, AAHOA is strategically aligning our core association missions of education, advocacy, and networking with the growing needs and aspirations of America’s hoteliers. We are committed to a distinctive vision for member engagement and resource curation to help hoteliers now, tomorrow, and in the future. The road to recovery runs through AAHOA, and I am confident in our ability to maintain this positive momentum in the coming months. ■



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**CECIL P. STATON**  
AAHOA PRESIDENT & CEO

## One call away: safety and security

““

While we build back our industry and grapple with the horrific incidents of violence perpetrated against our community, AAHOA remains committed to ensuring hoteliers, their guests, and employees are respected and supported.”

**D**URING THE PAST 14 MONTHS, HOTELIERS HAVE ADAPTED PROTOCOLS TO constantly maintain best practices in sanitation, safety, and security. While the health and safety of guests and employees remains top of mind, the increase in violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders piles additional stress to an already trying period for our industry. Just weeks ago, hotel owner Ushaben Patel and her husband Dilipbhai Patel of Elkton, MD, were violently attacked, resulting in the passing of Ushaben and the hospitalization of Dilipbhai. Our heartfelt condolences go out to Dilipbhai Patel and his family. Rest assured that justice will be delivered.

This violent attack against two small business owners in our community is repugnant and disturbingly among an increase in violence against hoteliers. As an association committed to lifting up America's hoteliers and members of the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, AAHOA stands firmly against violence, hate, and discrimination of all kinds. I want it to be clear to every member of AAHOA and the broader hospitality industry that you are an essential, valued part of our community and we feel deeply for anyone who experiences anxiety, uncertainty, or fear from these abhorrent acts of violence.

Today's climate poses extraordinary challenges to hoteliers and their teams already operating during a global pandemic. When considering fire escape plans, security cameras, and ADA accessibility standardized on every property, the enhanced cleaning measures and social distancing introduced by the pandemic pile onto an already extensive list of protocols and safety measures. It takes a lot to make a hotel thrive. Now, more than ever, search for means to find peace of mind and ease the anxieties of operating a small business. It takes resilience and intuition to adapt to the ever-changing hospitality market, and we are always seeking ways to make lodging service more secure for you and your employees.

### GET TO KNOW YOUR LOCAL FIRST RESPONDERS

In the event of a fire, crime, or natural disaster, your local first responders will be first on the scene. Annual check-ins with local law enforcement, the fire department, and paramedics are encouraged to keep your staff trained and your emergency response plans updated. You can't anticipate what may occur on your property, but you can have a plan ready and rehearsed. With the recent cases of violence against hoteliers, building relationships with law enforcement has never been more relevant. Hotel staff are already trained to recognize and report potential crimes, such as human trafficking, to local police. Dedicated security personnel are often not suitable to have on staff full time, but you can prepare your team and better execute a response to a worst-case scenario by maintaining frequent communication with law enforcement.

While we build back our industry and grapple with the horrific incidents of violence perpetrated against our community, AAHOA remains committed to ensuring hoteliers, their guests, and employees are respected and supported. No hotelier should go it alone, and always know that you can turn to AAHOA. We are here for you, your families, and your businesses. ■

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# 5 Things To Know About AAHOA This Month

## DON'T MISS THE YOUNG PROFESSIONAL HOTELIERS RECEPTION AT HUNTER.

AAHOA will host a Young Professional Hoteliers Reception during the 2021 Hunter Hotel Investment Conference, set for May 10-12 in Atlanta. Join us for an evening of networking with other young professional hoteliers and industry executives at the reception, which will be held 7-9 p.m. May 11 at STATS Brewpub in downtown

Atlanta. The Hunter Conference brings together the nation's most influential leaders and investors in the hotel industry to analyze trends, network, and turn prospective opportunities into business transactions.

[hunterconference.com](http://hunterconference.com)



## FORE! FOUR CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENTS LEFT IN 2021.

Join us at one of four upcoming golf tournaments in the North Central (June 9-10), North Pacific (July 13), Northwest (August 23), and North Carolina (August 28-29) Regions. It's a great way to support local charities and ongoing COVID-19 relief efforts, and also network in person, all while enjoying a beautiful day of competitive golf on some of the country's top golf courses. Participants' well-being, health, and safety at our events are our No. 1 priority, so we are taking all necessary precautions to keep you safe. [aahoa.com/events/golf](http://aahoa.com/events/golf)



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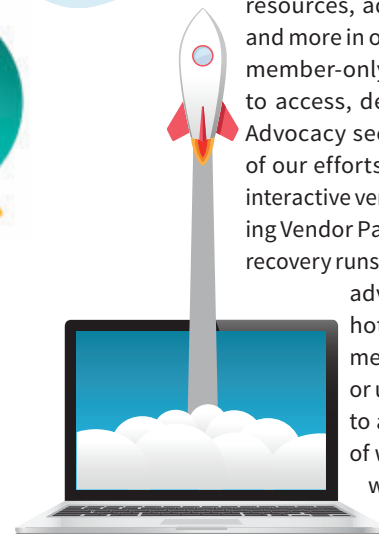
Did you know AAHOA sends weekly deals and discounts from our Industry Partners exclusively for AAHOA Members? We took your feedback to heart and combined their specials into one weekly Vendor Digest, which is chock full of great offerings that can help you on the road to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Aren't subscribed? Simply update your communication preferences in [MyAAHOA.com](http://MyAAHOA.com) and opt in so you don't miss out! You also can check out the online Vendor Directory for a complete list of AAHOA's Industry Partners.

[AAHOA.com/vendors](http://AAHOA.com/vendors)



## AAHOA IS SOON LAUNCHING A BRAND-NEW WEBSITE.

AAHOA is excited to soon unveil a brand-new member-centric website, upgrading our technology to allow members to make the most of your AAHOA membership experience. The new layout will be fully integrated into the MyAAHOA experience, putting all of AAHOA's educational resources, advocacy initiatives, news, events, and more in one place. New features also include member-only content that will require a login to access, dedicated Franchise Relations and Advocacy sections to keep members apprised of our efforts on their behalf, and a brand-new interactive vendor directory that will make accessing Vendor Partners easier than ever. The road to recovery runs through AAHOA and as the foremost advocate and resource for America's hotel owners, we're upgrading your membership experience. Join, renew, or upgrade today to ensure you're able to access all of these resources, some of which are members-only, when the website goes live. [AAHOA.com](http://AAHOA.com)



## IMPORTANT AAHOACON21 DEADLINES ARE LOOMING.

Several important deadlines leading up to AAHOACON21 will be here before you know it. Check the list below to make sure you don't miss out on great discounts and opportunities!

### [AAHOA.com/Convention](http://AAHOA.com/Convention)

- **June 4:** Award Nominations, Lifetime Member Refund Eligibility
- **June 7:** Board of Directors Nominations
- **June 30:** Annual Membership Renewal Sweepstakes
- **July 4:** Early Bird Registration, Hotelier Cancellation
- **August 6:** Committee Application, Voter Eligibility



# Legislative junctions on the road to recovery

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE



**M**ILLIONS OF VACCINES HAVE been distributed, hotel metrics have picked up, and lawmakers in Washington, D.C. show no signs of slowing down their legislative agendas. What legislation could America's hoteliers expect to see from the Capitol next?

## “BUILD BACK BETTER” AND BEYOND

Political power in Washington, D.C., tends to ebb and flow, especially after a competitive election cycle. The 2020 elections set the Democratic Party on a promising path with control of the White House and both Chambers of Congress, albeit with narrow majorities in the latter. Some campaign promises find their way onto the floors of Congress and then on to the Resolute desk, while others get ensnared in the partisan gridlock hanging over the nation's capital. Securing a key legislative victory in their first 100 days, President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris led their party to pass the American Rescue Plan (ARP), the first of Biden's three-part “Build Back Better” recovery agenda. The ARP was the sixth major relief package to pass and delivered \$1.9 trillion in relief measures. Shortly after it passed, President Biden announced part two of the White House's agenda, the American Jobs Plan (AJP).

The AJP focuses on major investments in domestic infrastructure and manufacturing, lacking some of the small business provisions included in its predecessor. At the time this article was penned, there were no bills introduced on the AJP as Congress and the Biden Administration continued to discuss the content of the plan. Still, the narrative in Washington, D.C., has revolved around the AJP proposal in recent weeks. In familiar fashion, Republicans are opposed to the plan as Democrats strive to maintain party unity, especially in the Senate where a few moderate Democrats are raising doubts.

Behind the scenes, AAHOA is keeping a tab on other proposed legislation that could assist the hospitality industry. Here is a brief overview of two standalone federal bills targeted toward the travel and tourism industry.

## PROTECTING TOURISM IN THE UNITED STATES ACT

Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Roy Blunt (R-MO), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), and Kevin Cramer (R-ND), co-chairs of the Senate Travel and Tourism Caucus, sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Commerce (USDOC) Secretary Gina Raimondo to request further information on the department's recovery plan. In the letter, the senators call on the USDOC to examine

the return of international travel, bringing back the travel and tourism workforce, and report on both the short- and long-term strategies the department has developed to assist recovery efforts.

Prior to sending the letter, this bipartisan group of senators introduced the Protecting Tourism in the United States Act (S. 115), “a bill to direct the Secretary of Commerce to conduct a study and submit to Congress a report on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the travel and tourism industry in the United States.” This bill also would secure funding for Brand USA, a public-private partnership to encourage travelers to visit America, through 2027.

## HOSPITALITY AND COMMERCE JOB RECOVERY ACT OF 2021

Senators Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) and Kevin Cramer (R-ND) introduced the Hospitality and Commerce Job Recovery Act of 2021 (S. 477), “a bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to create a refundable tax credit for travel expenditures.” The bill would create a temporary business tax credit to cover costs of attending structured events, such as a convention or trade show. It also proposes other tax credits for individual travelers, restaurants, and food and beverage companies, and tax deductions for entities in the entertainment industry. ■

# Florida Congressmen leading efforts to stabilize GSA per diem rates

*Common Ground profiles members of opposing parties who are working together to advance issues important to hoteliers.*

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE

## THE ISSUE

Every year, the General Services Administration (GSA) sets the per diem rates for the lower 48 Continental United States (CONUS). The per diem rates establish an allowance for federal employees to cover lodging, meals, and incidental expenses incurred while on official travel. In the CONUS, the per diem rates for the fiscal year (FY) are based on the average daily rate (ADR) reported by local contractors within a county, zip code, or locality. The standard rate for per diem reimbursements applies to 85% of counties in the CONUS.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the lodging industry, leading to record-low ADRs in markets across the country. Using the distressed ADR from the past year as the benchmark

for future per diem rates would be detrimental to the industry's recovery. Official government travel is a vital source of traffic for many hotels. Federal employees buy their meals and book their rooms with the

per diem allowance. Limiting the per diem would affect their ability to travel and work on the road while also cutting revenue for small business in the hospitality industry.



## COMMON GROUND

U.S. Representatives Bill Posey (R-FL-8) and Charlie Crist (D-FL-3) joined forces to stabilize per diem rates. In March, the Florida Congressmen reintroduced H.R. 2104., "to prohibit the Administrator of General Services from setting CONUS per diem-reimbursements rates below a certain level." This bipartisan legislation would require the GSA to stabilize future per diem rates based on the FY 2020 level, which was set before the pandemic. If passed, the bill would freeze the FY 2022 and 2023 per diem rates at the FY 2020 level.

### Rep. Bill Posey (R-FL-8), Co-Sponsor of H.R. 2104

*"Coronavirus-related travel restrictions and shutdowns have had a crippling effect on our whole economy, especially the hospitality and tourism industry, which is essential to Florida and many other travel destinations around the country. Setting per diem rates at the 2020 level is one important way that the federal government can help struggling businesses and their employees recover faster, and I thank Congressman Crist for working with me to reintroduce this legislation."*

### Rep. Charlie Crist (D-FL-3), Co-sponsor of H.R. 2104

*"Tourism is critical to Florida's economy. Because of COVID's heavy impact on travel, it makes no sense to base hotel per diem rates on 2020 numbers, which was obviously an outlier for the industry. I'm proud to work with Congressman Posey on this bipartisan bill to support Florida's hotel workers and owners to keep the Sunshine State the premiere travel destination for business, pleasure, and government travel."*

# The best defense is a good offense

Security has never been more challenging or important

by MICHAEL JACOBSON

**A**S HOTELIERS, YOU don't need me to tell you that the past year has been challenging, to say the very least. As our industry continues to adapt to an ever-changing environment and we navigate the "new normal" together, it can be all-too easy to fall into the trap of becoming absorbed in day-to-day operations and lose sight of the big picture. Many hoteliers are just trying to stay afloat. But it's critical that you, as owners and operators, take the time to step back and ensure the security of your hotel is comprehensive in every aspect of your property and investment. But what does security really entail? After all, when operating a successful hotel, the word "security" can encompass seemingly countless procedures and practices. Here are several ways to make your business more secure.

## SECURING YOUR PROPERTY, COLLEAGUES, AND GUESTS

Of course, the easiest area of security to reflect on is the physical security of your property. As business travel ground to a

halt throughout the country, many hotels have experienced a changing customer base that many of us have never hosted as guests before. In some cases, this has led to an increase in damage to hotels and – in worse-case scenarios – even violence.

The long-term security of your property depends a lot on brand management, as well. Unfortunately, some owners have been forced to decide between preserving their

reputations and welcoming any revenue that comes in the door. It is more important than ever for hoteliers to learn from each other in terms of safety protocols and enhanced security tactics to prevent issues at their properties. As an example, several hotels in Illinois

recently implemented tactics such as including additional security cameras, implementing keycard checks in the main lobby and at elevator banks, having staff walk hallways more regularly, and enhancing partnerships with local law enforcement.

Ultimately, without physical security, there is no travel industry. The safety of our employees and guests must remain the top consideration of every hotelier, regardless of the financial challenges we are currently facing.



Michael Jacobson  
President & CEO  
Illinois Hotel & Lodging  
Association (IHLA)

**SECURING AGAINST GOVERNMENT OVERREACH**

I know I'm preaching to the choir when I say the security and future of our industry are many times derailed by the actions taken by various levels of government. Elected leaders at the local, state, and federal levels continue to have the power to affect our industry's fate in many capacities. What we have witnessed in recent years is the continued government intrusion on – or keen interest in, if you prefer – various facets of our business. At the same time, as hotel owners are in desperate need of support from government officials because of the pandemic, many of those calls for help have fallen on deaf ears. The advocacy efforts across our industry, involving AAHOA, AHLA, state hotel associations, and other partners, are crucial to positioning our industry for recovery during the next few years. But we cannot be successful without the grassroots support of every hotelier nationwide. The more vocal we become, the greater our impact.

**SECURING YOUR INVESTMENT**

Lastly, the financial security of each hotel owner across the country has been jeopardized as a result of our industry being brought to its knees during the past 14 months. The constantly evolving legal landscape continues to pose challenges for operators who find themselves trying to grapple with these changes while having a limited staff to help them. Failing to keep up on the new regulations from Washington and our state capitols opens potential landmines that could prove costly for hoteliers in the long run. On top of that comes the increases in costs related to insurance, personal protective equipment, new cleaning standards, and other areas of our operations that were already costly, even before the pandemic.

**OUR COLLECTIVE ROLE IN ENHANCING SECURITY AND PROSPERITY**

These areas of risk all point to the importance of industry associations. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the value of AAHOA and state hotel associations has been increased more than ever before. As trends shift and the need arises to compile best practices for hotels to enhance their physical security, associations are well-suited to do just that. While it is helpful to have individual hoteliers reach out to lawmakers on key legislative issues, there is the need for a collective voice to speak on behalf of our entire industry, and associations are equipped to unify and amplify your voice. When it comes to monitoring regulatory changes that impact hotels, brokering

cost-savings programs to save hoteliers money, or fighting to create grant programs to provide federal and state support for hotel owners, associations are designed for that very purpose.

A former colleague often said that associations are meant to do for their members what they are not able to do for themselves. Working together as one team and one industry will help us collectively rise up and emerge from this devastating period stronger than ever. I hope you will not only remain involved with AAHOA but that you also reach out to your state hotel associations and create stronger bonds with them. This will help advance our agendas and preserve the long-term security and success of our beloved hotel industry. ■



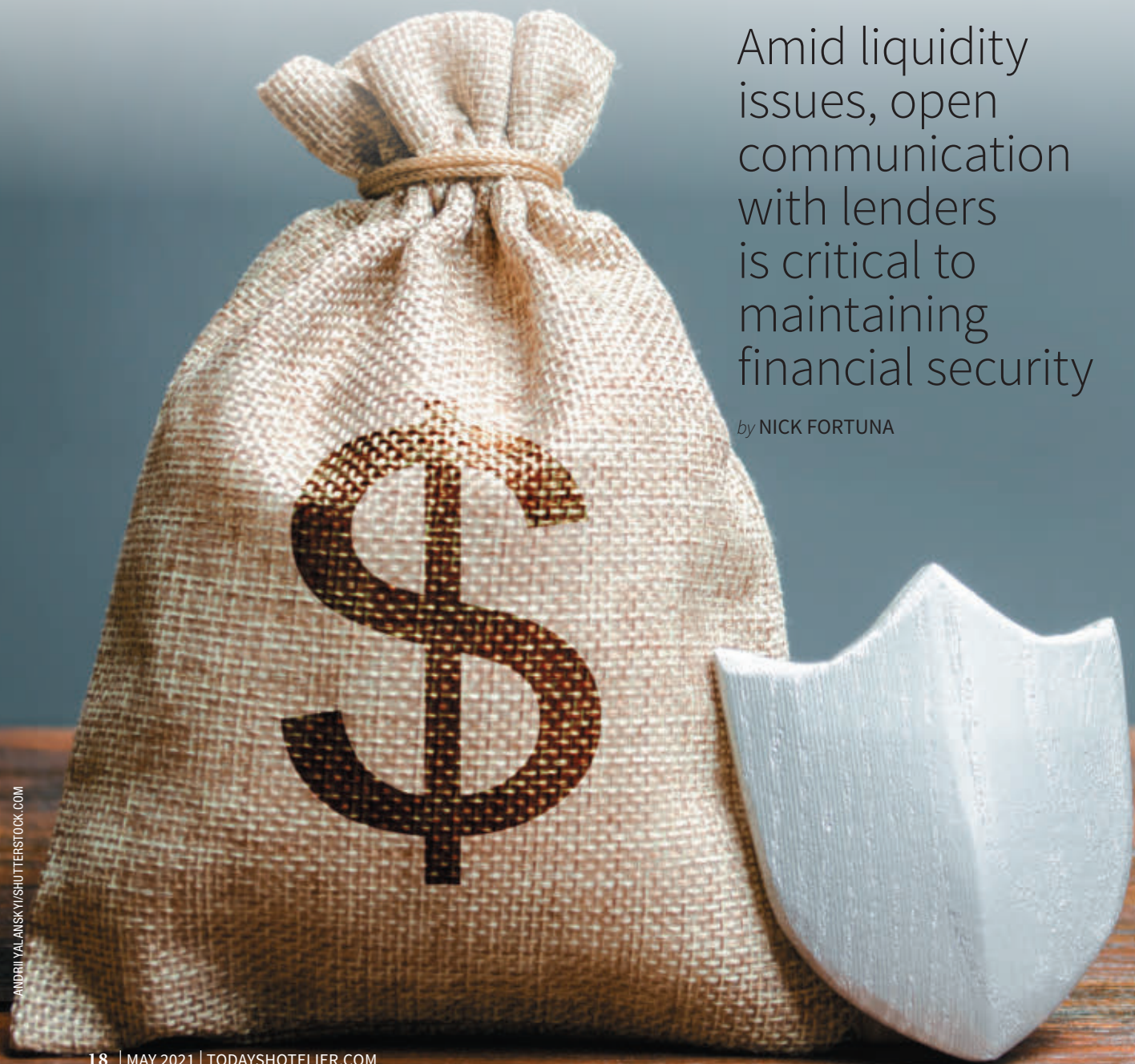
Working together as one team and one industry will help us collectively rise up and emerge from this devastating period stronger than ever.”



# Creating a fiscal fo

Amid liquidity issues, open communication with lenders is critical to maintaining financial security

by NICK FORTUNA



# rtress

**SUCCESSFULLY OPERATING** a hotel requires a broad skill set, years of industry experience, and a ton of hard work – and your banker knows it. That’s why most lenders, wanting no part of managing a hotel themselves, have been willing to help hoteliers stay afloat during the pandemic.

If your property was profitable before COVID-19, if you’ve pared expenses, and if you’ve maintained open communication with your lenders, then you’re making the right moves, according to hotel industry experts. Just hang on a little longer, watch the nation’s vaccination campaign accelerate, and wait for the inevitable economic rebound, which could be coming directly.

## I WILL SURVIVE

“For most owners, there is light at the end of the tunnel,” said Dave Mei, executive vice president of finance and acquisitions for Hotel Equities, a hospitality management and development firm based in Alpharetta, GA. “I would say the No. 1 thing to do is communicate with your lenders and special servicers. Now more so than at any time I can remember in the past three cycles, lenders

are willing to work with owners as much as they can.”

Shreyas (JR) Patel, an AAHOA Lifetime Member currently serving on AAHOA’s Strategic Planning Committee, echoed those sentiments. Patel, president of Helix Hospitality, a hotel ownership and management company based in Itasca, Ill., said banks are reticent to assume the burden and costs of operating a hotel, so they’d rather stick with the owner.

“Most conventional banks and bridge lenders recognize that pandemic-related losses are not directly related to how the borrower operates a property,” Patel said. “Rather, they are systemic. So long as the borrower keeps an open line of communication with the bank, there tends to be a willingness to work through short-term deferrals of payments, deferrals of reserves, interest-only periods, and other covenant-testing waivers.”

## GOOD TIMES

Patel said that in recent months, he’s seen quite a few cases of loans being sold by institutions that need to clean up their balance sheets. Private debt funds or other entities are purchasing hotels’ loans, often

at substantial discounts, and essentially becoming their bank.

“They generally want to see you succeed and continue to pay your note, so the willingness to keep you in your property is quite high,” Patel said. “If your loan can be modified to a payment that you can afford, and your loan then becomes current, the value comes back for the owner of the note – a perfect win-win.”

However, there can be danger when a hotelier’s note is sold. When the basis is low and the property is in a prime location or isn’t well capitalized, a private fund or entity that buys a hotel’s note may be eager to foreclose, take over the property, ride the recovery wave, and eventually sell the asset at a premium.

“Unfortunately, you really don’t have control of the note being sold,” Patel said.

Most experienced hoteliers, having lived with the pandemic for more than a year, have taken the steps prescribed in this article, but hospitality experts offer the following checklist to make it through several more lean months.

#### KEEP YOUR LENDERS UPDATED

This means sharing the good news and the bad, according to Jon Peck, principal of Chicago-based Peck Hotel Consulting. When hoteliers are transparent and proactive, lenders can have greater confidence that properties are in good hands.

“Banks and traditional lenders do not want to take back the hotels and become hotel owners,” Peck said. “They are smart people and understand this is not their business, and it creates additional liability for them in the form of future operating losses and all of the complexities that come with owning an asset class with a 24-hour lease.”

In addition to regularly submitting financial statements, hoteliers should provide information on future bookings and any developments that signal a return to normal. These include updated schedules of conventions and local events; restaurants, sports arenas, and other indoor venues being allowed to operate at greater capacity; local universities holding in-person classes and allowing more fans at sporting events; and industry forecasts from reputable entities such as AAHOA, AHLA, and STR.

“All of these things are indicators that business will come back, so it’s important to share that knowledge and research with the lender,” said Patel, a member of the advisory board for DePaul University’s School of Hospitality Leadership.

Lenders may know management companies that can help hoteliers or

techniques and resources that other borrowers are using, Patel said. You won’t know unless you ask.

“Remember, you are not the only one out there who is having difficulties paying your mortgage,” Patel said. Every real estate investment trust, private equity

## Money matters



**Develop alternative plans for rescue capital.** There are hotel-focused debt and equity funds out there, and while the capital they offer isn’t cheap, it can serve as a bridge until demand returns, so hoteliers should know their options, Peck said.



**Make sure your operating costs are in line with the revenue reality.** With revenue down sharply, hoteliers had better reduce their labor costs and their fixed costs with vendors, and operators should conduct regular cash-flow reviews to ensure alignment.

Mei said many vendors, like lenders, have been allowing hoteliers to defer payments during the pandemic, recognizing that better days are ahead.

“It’s really been incredible to see all the partners working as best they can in good faith to get through this crisis,” he said. “Almost everybody has been willing to defer, delay, or forbear – and probably more so because there is light at the end of the tunnel.”



**Communicate with limited partners.** The hotel’s general partner should advise limited partners of the potential for a capital call and outline the property’s potential needs, Peck said. “You want to let them know how you see things – the operating forecast, the cash-flow forecast, and capital needs – and tell them to get ready for their part,” he said.



**Take advantage of PPP money and state grants for pandemic-impacted businesses.** The federal Payroll Protection Program has been instrumental in helping hoteliers retain their workers and continue to make rent, mortgage, and utility payments.



**Work with lenders and franchisors to access FF&E and other reserve funds.** A hotel’s furniture, fittings, and equipment reserve – the money set aside to replace these components as they wear out – can be a source of emergency funding.



**Ensure your sales and revenue departments are ready for demand to return.** Many departments have been cut severely due to the pandemic, so hoteliers should have a plan and enough manpower to manage the first wave of leads that hit sales, Peck said.



**Seek expert help.** Hoteliers who are unsatisfied with their lenders should reach out to fellow AAHOA Members and industry contacts. They can discuss the aid they’re getting from lenders and recommend a good consultant or lawyer. Mei said it’s understandable for hoteliers who are struggling to want to avoid additional expenses, but if you feel your property is at stake, call for backup.

“

...if your property was underperforming prior to the pandemic, those fundamentals are unlikely to change simply because travel has resumed in earnest.”

firm, and owner in hospitality and commercial real estate “is feeling it,” he said.

“There’s nothing like a good, trusted attorney,” Mei said. “It’s really important to have a good understanding of loan documents. That’s absolutely the first place that I would start – reading your loan documents with a fine-toothed comb. Owners who aren’t comfortable probably should get some expert advice, talk to their friends in the business, and do their own research. There’s so much available online.”

**BEST HONEST ABOUT THE FUTURE**

For hoteliers who have poured their sweat into struggling properties, it can be tempting to believe that an industry turnaround will lift all ships. But if your property was underperforming prior to the pandemic, those fundamentals are unlikely to change simply because travel has resumed in earnest.

Furthermore, if a market is seeing a massive amount of new supply and can’t absorb it all, then the least-solvent borrowers will fall first, Patel said. If a borrower is unable to pay, then banks may force a sale, “which is probably the most vulnerable position to be in,” he added.

“This likely means that the borrower or the property itself are not well-positioned or well-capitalized to make it through the pandemic, and it needs to be sold at a discount,” Patel said. “If the basis is favorable, the lender will likely look at market fundamentals to see how long it will take your property to recover before deciding on next steps.”

Mei said the nation’s well-documented lack of affordable housing is leading some property owners to convert hotels

into multifamily housing units or micro-apartments. Some owners are converting properties themselves, while others are selling to real estate developers and entrepreneurs, often at a discount. Mei said that in some markets, permanent housing may represent a struggling property’s highest and best use.

“Everyone is anticipating quite a big rebound, but there probably will be a day of reckoning for hotels where it’s not financially viable on a go-forward basis,” Mei

said. “Lenders are going to have to make hard decisions about whether to foreclose or not, and owners are going to have to look at alternative uses.

“Multifamily housing and single-family residential are really hot, so there are conversion opportunities.

Some of the older extended-stay properties make for very easy conversion into multifamily or micro-apartment units, so we are seeing more of that, and I would expect more of that to happen.” ■




photo taken prior to Covid-19

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# Diffusing

# TENSE situations

How to help create a safe and secure environment for front-line associates and guests

by ZOHREEN ISMAIL

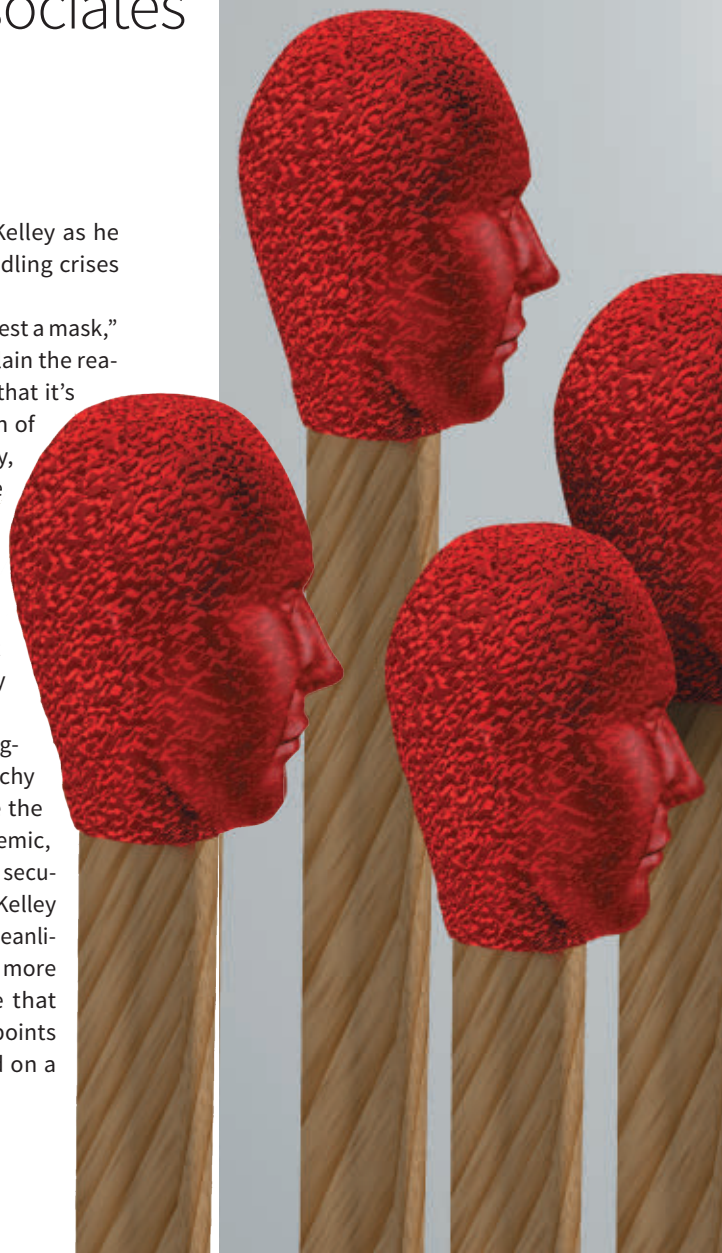
**P**ICTURE THIS SCENARIO: Your hotel staff member is standing respectfully behind the front desk as she watches a guest enter the hotel lobby without a face mask. The staff member politely asks, “Sir, would you please cover your nose and mouth with our complimentary face mask?” The guest refuses and begins to argue and raise his voice. What should she do in this situation?

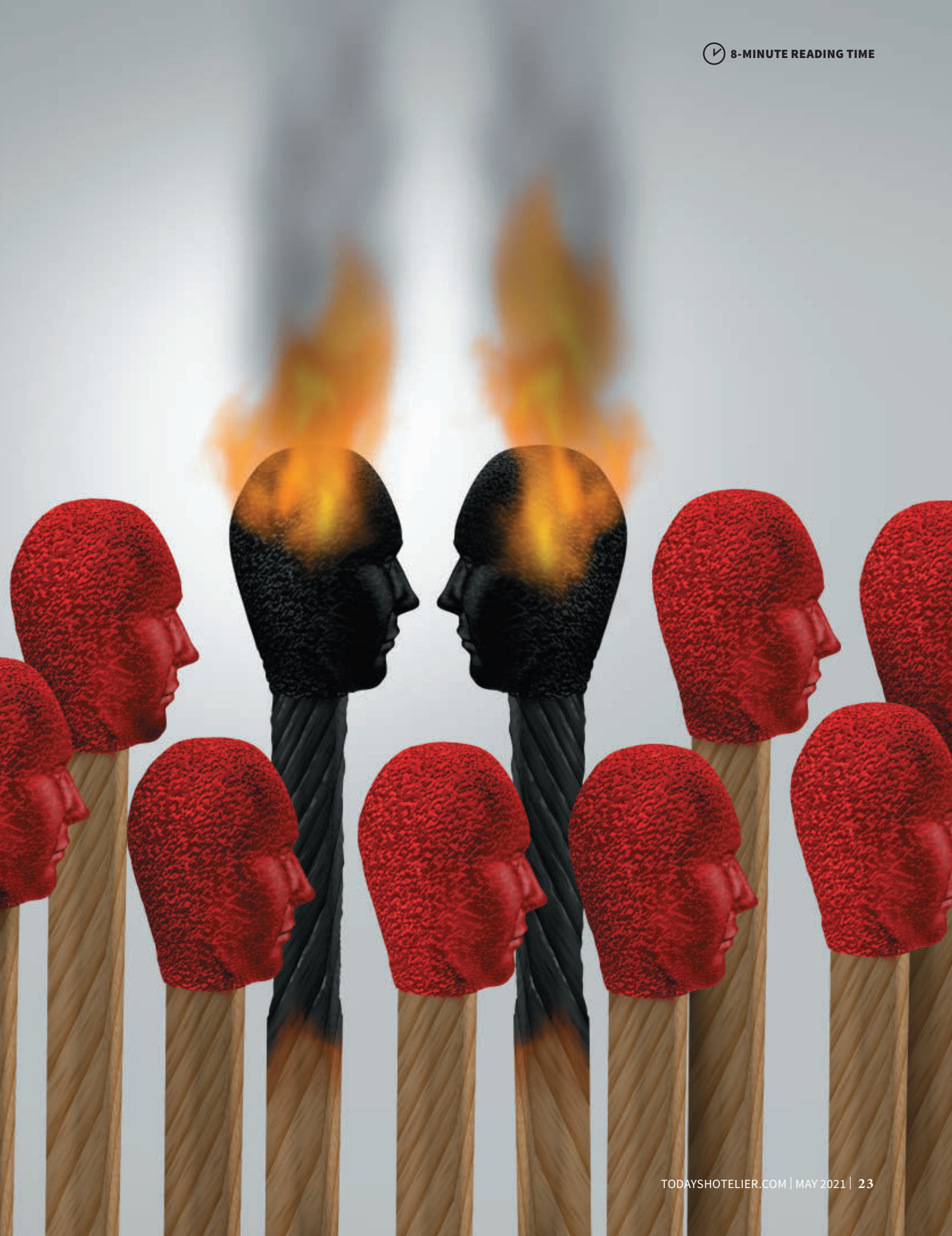
The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges for hotel staff members, whether it be front-desk associates interacting with guests or staff members cleaning rooms. The operational process has changed – and it’s difficult to predict for how long. Chuck Kelley, an industry expert, spent 32 years working with Marriott International beginning as an assistant restaurant manager and working his way up to executive vice president responsible for Marriott’s Caribbean/Latin American region. Kelley is currently a partner with Cayuga Hospitality Consultants, LLC, a network of independent hospitality consultants. *Today’s Hotelier* had the

pleasure of speaking with Kelley as he shared his expertise on handling crises situations.

“First step is to offer the guest a mask,” Kelley offered. “Second, explain the reasoning for the mask; clarify that it’s for the safety and protection of everyone around you. Lastly, you don’t want to leave the responsibility of further challenging the guest with the front-line associate. Have a protocol in place that escalates it to the next level of management,” Kelley explained.

Safety and security have significantly risen in the hierarchy of guest expectations since the pandemic. “Before the pandemic, everyone expected safety and security, but it was unintrusive,” Kelley added. “Today, guests want cleanliness and security to be much more visible. Guests want to see that high-traffic areas and touchpoints in hotels are being sanitized on a regular basis.”





## DEFINING TOUGH SITUATIONS

Many of our readers have been in the hospitality industry for decades, and they have experienced and navigated through all types of challenging situations. The one type of scenario that can be described as the most controversial is one that relates to tough encounters with hotel guests, because in those interactions, there are many things in jeopardy, including brand reputation, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

“An obvious example would be the individual at the hotel bar who had too much to drink,” Kelley pointed out. “Bartenders and cocktail servers need to be trained to diffuse those situations.” And hotel staff members want to be able to mitigate these tense situations without compromising on excellent customer service.

“One aspect to handling this type of situation is to always remember to get the individual away from the group or other guests,” Kelley explained. “Handle it one-on-one as opposed to out in the open where the upset or difficult guest has an audience.”

Kelley shares examples of asking the guest to speak outside and always ensuring that the option of asking a senior-level management staff member to assist is present.

## RESPONDING TO A CRISIS ONLINE

The increasing growth of social media and the internet itself requires hotels to maintain positive reputations online while also communicating effectively online. And this applies to crisis management and communication.

Excellent customer service was always at the forefront for hotel owners and hospitality professionals. A major part of security is ensuring your guests feel safe when arriving at your property. However, what can you do if unhappy guests have left bad reviews online? As Kelley shared, one way to tackle this is to have the conversation offline. “For example, if a guest was asked to leave because they did not wear a face mask then left a terrible review online, then have senior management contact them offline. Try to avoid a lot of back and forth with a guest online. That’s a lose-lose situation,” he explained.

## LEARNING FROM PAST CRISES

The pandemic is not the first crisis the hospitality industry has faced. Hospitality



# Keys to success

According to Chuck Kelley, partner with Cayuga Hospitality Consultants, LLC, every hotel should have crisis-management plans in place. And in that plan, owners and operators may need to imagine all the potential scenarios that may arise in a guest-and-associate interaction. Next, strategize and ensure all the staff members feel prepared to handle any situation. Kelley shared the four key components of a crisis-management plan.

# 1

### PRIORITIES

The guests and employees are always the top priority, followed by assets and recovery. Excellent customer service is the foundation for hotel owners and operators, so customer service should be a pillar even in a time of crisis.

# 2

### POLICY

Every hotel, whether a large franchise or a smaller boutique hotel, follows policies that are consistent with the region and city in which they operate. Understanding your local area’s disaster management policies is important. For example, if your state requires a face mask to be worn in public places, that rule should be implemented at your property.

# 3

### PROCEDURES

As a hotel owner, your operational business plan should include procedural guidelines on how to interact with guests in challenging situations. For example, do you amend the cancellation policy for COVID-related cancellations? Having a clear set of procedures that everyone follows will reduce the number of upset or angry guests, and it will be invaluable to have a playbook when diffusing a tense situation.

# 4

### DETAILS

Assign an easy location where all hotel staff members can access important information they may need in a crisis situation. For example, make emergency phone numbers readily available for the staff to make them feel more equipped and safe in handling challenging situations.

Kelley also emphasized the importance of training for all hotel associates. “It’s all about proactive planning and training,” he said. “Whether it’s a pandemic, weather-related, or a food-borne illness, you want training in place so frontline associates know how to correctly and safely manage tough situations.”



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### **ADVOCACY**

AAHOA advocates on behalf of hoteliers at the federal, state, and local levels, and represents the voice of franchisees with their brands. Thanks to AAHOA's efforts, hotelier-specific language was incorporated into economic stimulus legislation, including the Paycheck Protection Program.



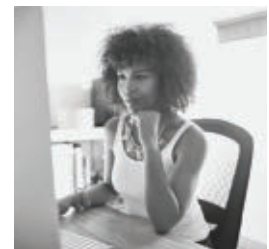
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professionals are resilient and flexible, always adapting to the needs of society and the communities they serve. In 2010, hospitality professionals in New York City had to respond to a bed bug crisis on social media. About 13,140 bed bug complaints were reported, 7,000-plus cases were confirmed, and nearly 11% of all U.S. hotel reviews on TripAdvisor complained about bed bug infestations. Looking back at this example can provide insights into establishing the importance of having a crisis response plan.

So, how did hotels respond to this health-related crisis? More than half of the hotels in the area made it a priority to provide regular updates regarding guest concerns and offered a sympathetic attitude toward the situation. About 83% of hotels tried to remind their guests of their previous amenities that were unaffected by the bed bugs.

### DEVELOPING TRUST WITH YOUR GUESTS

One of the reasons why home-sharing platforms such as Airbnb and Vrbo have become increasingly popular is the opportunity for guests to communicate with their host before arriving at the property. This communication between guest and host builds trust and excitement.

The guest experience begins as soon as your guests book their room. Having your staff call your guests a day prior to their arrival to go over what to expect and any new guidelines that are in place can help let your guests be informed and answer any questions before they arrive at your property.

“Having a quality product, excellent amenities, and a first-class loyalty program is the price of entry. If you want to truly earn the loyalty of a customer then excellent service is what makes a difference,” Kelley said. “I also think a diverse workforce broadens the understanding of your customers.” By taking extra measures to ensure your staff is reaching out to guests and preparing them for what to expect, it can lessen the number of upset guests.

### ONE COMMON THEME

The concept of safety and security certainly isn't new for hotel owners and operators. The best practices of communicating expectations with your guests, isolating a guest from the crowd to discuss a tense

situation, and ensuring your staff members have the resources and tools they need are industry standards. “More visible security will become a norm,” Kelley said. “Safety and security were always in the background, and now it's becoming more visible to guests.”

As the hospitality industry continues to evolve, owners and operators are adapting to changing situations while keeping best practices at the forefront to ensure the safety and security of all of your guests, associates, and properties. ■



## An ounce of prevention

Many confrontations arise out of mere misunderstandings. Nowhere is that more evident than when your staff is dealing with an irate guest and neither of the two parties appear to be communicating on the other's level. With that in mind, here are several key steps to take before any metaphorical landmines are detonated in your lobby.

**Define “crisis.”** Having a guest whose room key doesn't work doesn't warrant a nuclear-level reaction from the staff. But if a guest is assaulted, that certainly requires a different response. Outline the general criteria for what constitutes a management-level problem and be sure your staff knows the difference.

**Timing is everything.** Often, the speed at which someone responds to a problem or complaint can change how the situation is resolved. Put steps in place to allow your staff to move quickly to resolve difficult situations and act with autonomy.

**Set attitudes.** If your staff tends to view guests as an annoyance, it stands to reason they won't treat complaints – serious or slight – with the respect they deserve.

**Listen.** Anyone who has worked in any form of customer service has experience in conflict management. Have you asked your staff recently for their input on how they've dealt with unruly guests or challenging coworkers?

**Follow the money.** Hospitality is an incredibly tight labor market. Properties are losing (or gaining) staff over seemingly slight pay differences. Staff members who are happy with their compensation are more likely to go the extra mile to proactively resolve problems and not introduce conflict themselves.

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# AAHOACON<sup>21</sup>

The most-anticipated  
AAHOA event of the year!



*The road to recovery runs through* AAHOA  
**AUGUST 3-6, 2021 | DALLAS, TX**

by HEATHER CARNES

**A** AHOACON21 IS A FEW SHORT MONTHS AWAY AND WILL BE AAHOA'S FIRST IN-PERSON CONVENTION AND TRADE SHOW since 2019! It's been an unprecedented 15 months for our industry, and there's never been a more important time to gather for the largest hospitality event of 2021.

With leading names in the industry, incredible insights from experts you can trust, inspiration around every corner, and the chance to network, learn, and make deals on the trade show floor – all in person – you do not want to miss this year's event on Aug. 3-6 in Dallas, TX.

## At AAHOACON21, you'll have the chance to:

- Meet with incredible vendors who are ready to help you prepare for the resurgence of travel
- Share stories, accomplishments, and insights from the pandemic and on the path to recovery
- Learn about the economic landscape from experts in the field
- Hear the latest updates out of Washington, D.C., including advocacy initiatives aimed at recovery
- Get insights from keynote speakers who are sure to inspire
- Celebrate the grand reopening of our industry and advancing further down the road to recovery
- Participate in AAHOA elections, general sessions, educational sessions, our Gala Reception, and more

It's time to make plans to travel, see old friends, and gather for what will be a historic and unforgettable event this summer. We can't wait to see you there! Register today at [AAHOA.com/Convention](http://AAHOA.com/Convention).



## HELP AAHOA RECOGNIZE THE INDUSTRY'S SHINING STARS: SUBMIT YOUR AWARDS NOMINEES TODAY

Each year, AAHOA honors hoteliers for their contributions to the hospitality industry, and the challenges of the past year have indeed revealed greatness. Do you know a hotelier who has gone above and beyond in their efforts, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic? Now is the time to nominate him or her for one of seven awards to be bestowed at AAHOACON21 on Aug. 3-6 in Dallas, TX. The deadline to submit nominations is Friday, June 4, and you don't need to be an AAHOA Member to submit a nomination. Visit [AAHOA.com/Convention](http://AAHOA.com/Convention) to learn more and submit your nominations.

- AAHOA Award of Excellence
- Cecil B. Day Community Service Award
- IAHA Independent Hotel of the Year Award
- Outreach Award for Philanthropy
- Outstanding Woman Hotelier of the Year Award
- Outstanding Young Professional Hotelier of the Year Award
- Political Forum Award for Advocacy

## AAHOA Lifetime Members: Important Deadline

As a valued AAHOA Lifetime Member, you are eligible for a complimentary registration to the 2021 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show if you register on or before **Friday, June 4, 2021**.



# AAHOACON<sup>21</sup> WHERE THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY COMES TOGETHER



“The biggest thing we are looking forward to is to reconnect with old friends and meet new AAHOA Members. It has been a very challenging year during the pandemic with no conferences or meetings. We are thrilled that AAHOA will be hosting an in-person convention in Dallas, TX, and getting back to the “new” normal.”

**Hitesh (HP) Patel, Past AAHOA Chairman, 2018-2019; COO, Curve Hospitality**



“I’m most looking forward to being with the incredible AAHOA family and sending the world the message the hospitality business is back in action.”

**Glenn Haussman, CEO, No Vacancy News Media**



“There is no annual conference that more of us from Wyndham Hotels & Resorts attend than AAHOACON. We look forward to getting together in person again as we work as an industry to navigate the recovery, restore profitability, and build a better path forward in a post-COVID world.”

**Geoff Ballotti, President & CEO, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts**



“AAHOA has been the pinnacle when it comes to an industry conference. Looking forward to meeting with our hoteliers and learning how each one adapted their models during the pandemic to protect their NOI.”

**Nishant (Neal) Patel, Treasurer, AAHOA**



“I’m looking forward to meeting old friends and establishing new relationships.”

**Andy Ingraham, President & CEO, National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators & Developers (NABHOOD)**



“AAHOACON is one of the highlights of the hotel industry’s annual event calendar. As a small business owner, I relate to and connect well with the AAHOA community. I have been going to AAHOACON for many years and find it to be an incredibly productive and enjoyable event.”

**Harry Javer, President and Founder, The Lodging Conference**



“I’m excited to have the opportunity to reconnect with old friends and network with hotel owners from around the nation. See you in Dallas!!”

**Rupesh Patel, Hotel Owner/Investor, Industry Advocate, RUPESH.co**



“No question I am looking forward to getting together in person. There is no substitute for the personal connection to understand what we can continue to do to provide value to our owners.”

**Jim Alderman, CEO, Radisson Hotel Group Americas**



“I am looking forward to reconnecting with franchisees again in person with whom we have created genuine relationships, and share the excitement surrounding the Red Roof family of brands in 2021 with AAHOACON attendees.”

**Matthew Hostetler, CDO, Red Roof Inns, Inc.**



“Can’t wait for AAHOACON21. It has been some time since we had a chance to network with fellow hoteliers, meet up with vendors for new products and services, and get insight from leaders about the future of the industry.”

**Bhavesh Patel, Past AAHOA Chairman, 2017-2018; Principal, ADM Hotels**



“When I joined AAHOA last year, I looked forward to meeting Members at the famed AAHOA Convention & Trade Show. I did not expect that I would have to wait more than a year for that to happen. As we rebuild after the most challenging crisis to face our industry, it is important to remember that no hotelier has to go it alone. The road to recovery runs through AAHOA, and I cannot wait to see everyone, in person, in Dallas this August!”

**Cecil P. Staton, President & CEO, AAHOA**



“Getting. Back. On. The. Road! That’s what I think everyone is looking forward to: striking up new conversations with old friends. Zoom fatigue is real and most people want to meet face to face again.”

**David Eisen, Director of Hotel Intelligence, Americas, HotStats**



“Hospitality is all about connections, and I can’t think of a better opportunity to reconnect than AAHOACON21. AAHOACON21 will be a chance to meet in person to share experiences and see old friends as we recover from the most trying time in the history of our industry.”

**Mitch Patel, President & CEO, Vision Hospitality Group, Inc.**



“I am super excited to see all my AAHOA friends!”

**Chip Rogers, President & CEO, American Hotel & Lodging Association**



“AAHOACON truly is where the hotel industry and AAHOA Members come together, providing content-rich education sessions, industry-leading speakers, and a plethora of opportunities to build purposeful, life-long relationships and partnerships to help advance and support the industry.”

**Greg Cocchiarella, Vice President Industry Relations, Ecolab**



“I am looking forward to seeing so many familiar faces from our membership and industry at AAHOACON21 in Dallas. After the year we have had to endure, it makes me appreciate my peers even more. The social interaction and networking at our conference this year is more valuable than ever. Can’t wait!”

**Biran Patel, Chairman, AAHOA**

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"We are very much looking forward to AAHOACON21. This will be a great opportunity to reconnect with the AAHOA community. Our industry is a family that never gives up when times are tough."

**Lynette Montoya, President & CEO, Latino Hotel Association**



"I am looking forward to meeting and listening to our fellow hoteliers. It's been a long year. I am Zoomed out, and AAHOACON21 will be the kickoff signature event for

AAHOA Members. Let's make it an epic convention in Dallas!"  
**Bharat Patel, CHO, Secretary, AAHOA**



"After a year that has challenged us in unthinkable ways, we are all eager to come together in-person to celebrate our strength and resilience. There's no substitute for human connection, and I am looking forward to seeing my old acquaintances and making new ones at AAHOACON."

**David Kong, President & CEO, Best Western**



"We are looking forward to seeing all of our friends and association partners we haven't seen in over a year! We are super excited to see everyone in Dallas!"

**Daniel Brown, National Sales Manager, Acculock, Inc.**

"We are thrilled to attend AAHOACON21 this summer as travel is gaining important strides and business events begin to flourish again. It is especially exciting to join so many hoteliers and vendor partners in one of our great cities in Texas. See you in Dallas!"

**Scott Joslove, President & CEO, THLA**



"I'm looking forward to seeing and meeting all my fellow hoteliers in person. This will give me an opportunity to learn, see new products at the trade show, and to simply have fun!"

**Vinay Patel, Vice Chairman, AAHOA** ■



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# Should I expand my portfolio to other commercial real estate outside of hospitality?

by RUSHI SHAH

**C**OMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE IS a large asset class that allows investors to diversify outside of equity, bond, and commodity investing. The commercial real estate master asset class is further divided into multiple sub-asset classes or food groups such as industrial, retail, self-storage, office, multi-family, and of course hotels. According to the Commercial Real Estate Finance Council, the commercial real estate industry generates more than \$400 billion in total annual deal volume, of which hospitality contributes 10%-15%. This leaves a healthy 85%-90% of the industry focused on other property types. Investors set thresholds for the required yield they need from any real estate investment for a given risk, so they are continually looking to find loans or loan products to invest in at all stages of the cycle. Motivated by this investor demand, capital markets search for assets that will continue to perform even amidst economic turmoil. Mezzanine debt and preferred equity capital is also typically more readily available for commercial real estate assets outside hotels because there is more investor appetite for the risk from other asset classes. This is because these type of capital providers, such as private equity funds and family offices, are often underwriting the underlying leases as security for their investment, and they do want to take on the operational risk of a hotel.

To better determine if branching out from hotels is an option, let's explore a few of the most popular asset types and how they compare to owning a hotel.

## SELF-STORAGE

The commercial real estate industry classifies hotels as an operating business, and a hotel's closest commercial cousin is self-storage. In self-storage, an owner or self-storage management company will purchase a cluster of storage units and rent them out on a monthly or short-term basis to individuals and businesses that need extra space for items they don't need to access on a regular basis. This need for offsite storage has weathered the economy's ups and down, and the asset has proven to be a resilient investment during recession and through economic recovery. Self-storage assets can be evaluated similar to hotels because the main driving metric is revenue per available unit. However, the financing market views self-storage slightly more favorably than a hotel when it comes to terms of leverage and risk. One of the main reasons for self-storage's edge is its cashflow durability and supply constraints in the market. Many municipalities have imposed moratoriums on new built self-storage assets. This is often because storage doesn't typically beautify the community and may even be considered an eyesore, but more importantly, it's because self-storage doesn't generate the same levels of

local tax revenue like other asset types, including hotels. Self-storage's resiliency is also appealing to the commercial mortgage-backed securities (CMBS) market, which was further demonstrated during the recent pandemic.

## RETAIL

Retail is another asset class many hotel investors are eying. Right now, retail assets are challenging to finance, as a large portion of tenants in the U.S. are restaurants or restaurant-related businesses that have been pummeled by COVID-19 shutdowns. There are pockets of opportunity, however, where capital markets are willing to still provide financing. For example, retail centers that are home to service-provider tenants such as hair salons, daycare center, fitness center, paint-mixing/hardware shops, and other essential community businesses that have been dubbed "Amazon-proof." There is also opportunity within retail centers anchored by grocery stores. Grocery stores have continued to be a necessity throughout the pandemic, drawing traffic to the stores themselves, as well as to their neighbor tenants.

## MULTIFAMILY

For hoteliers looking to diversify their portfolios, multifamily has emerged as the logical option. This is partly driven by how similar the multifamily construction and management process is to that of a hotel. The availability of

government financing for multifamily properties is also attractive to hoteliers.

**OFFICE**

Office assets have been particularly challenged during the pandemic. The market doesn't know how many tenants will return to offices, at what level they will return, and how long will it take. This makes it difficult for lenders underwriting on projections.

**CHOOSING THE RIGHT FOOD GROUP**

All commercial real estate asset types are extremely market dependent, and choosing where to acquire an asset is just as important as selecting which type of asset to buy. Right now, there are several markets in the Southern part of the U.S. that are getting a lot of attention. This is because of the inward mobility from higher tax jurisdictions and more lenient local government restrictions on businesses.

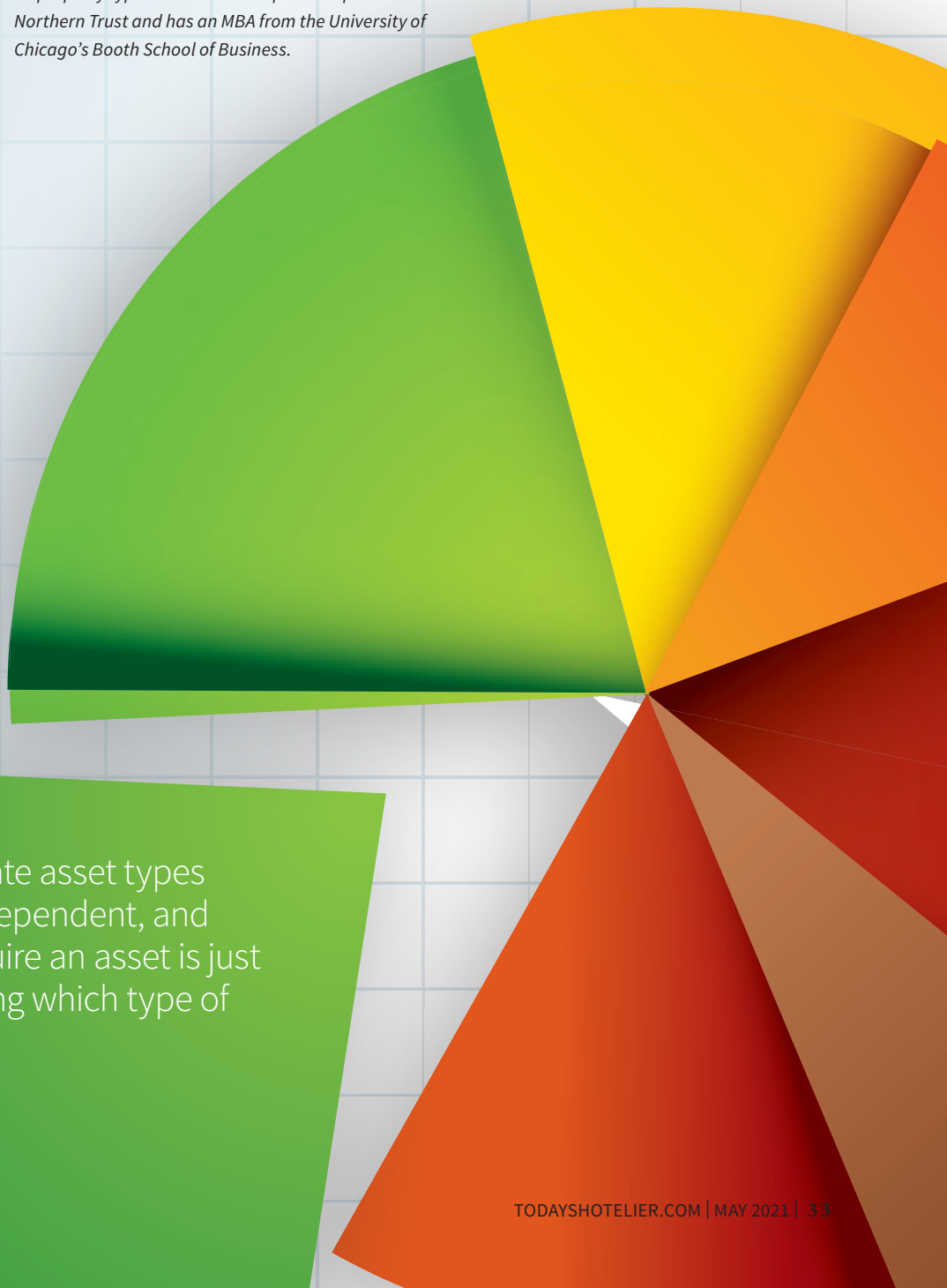
There are opportunities in the market for hoteliers looking to diversify into other asset classes. It's important to consult with an expert who understands all asset classes and their underwriting metrics to ensure all options are understood, obstacles are identified, and the most viable financing solutions are leveraged. ■



*Rushi Shah is principal and CEO of the commercial mortgage and real estate investment banking firm and AAHOA Allied Member Mag Mile Capital. As a leader in hospitality financing, Shah specializes in structuring and placing high-leverage, nonrecourse bridge and permanent debt with cash out for full- and limited-service hotels nationwide. Since joining the firm's predecessor, Aries Capital, in 2015, Shah has structured and closed hundreds of millions in financing for all property types. Shah has held previous positions at Northern Trust and has an MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.*



All commercial real estate asset types are extremely market dependent, and choosing where to acquire an asset is just as important as selecting which type of asset to buy.”





A conversation about the state of small businesses with Congresswoman Young Kim

by ALFREDO ORTIZ

HEATHER MACDONALD//SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

**C**ONGRESSWOMAN YOUNG KIM is a freshman member of the U.S. House of Representatives serving California's 39th District. As a former small business owner and the current Ranking Member of the Small Business Subcommittee on Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Workforce Development, she sat down with her to discuss her background and the future of small businesses in America.

Here are a few takeaways from our conversation.

**TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND WHY YOU DECIDED TO RUN FOR CONGRESS.**

I came to the United States with my family from South Korea in middle school. We lived in Guam, then Hawaii, then California, where I put myself through school at USC. I ran a small business, raised my family, and served my community in Southern California. Now, I am honored to be one of the first Korean-American women to serve in Congress.

I ran for Congress to make sure all voices in our diverse community in the 39th District of California were heard, get through the gridlock, and bring common-sense policies to Washington.

The 39th District is my home. To be able to give back to the community that has given to me is so exciting and the privilege

of a lifetime. As a Korean-American, I think that I am in Congress also shows the American Dream is alive and real. I hope to make a positive impact in Congress and work together with my colleagues to ensure Americans of all walks of life can achieve their dream like I did.

**HOW WILL YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A SMALL BUSINESS OWNER SHAPE YOUR TIME IN OFFICE?**

I have experienced the struggles entrepreneurs face to start and stay in business. Small businesses aren't a talking point; these are real people providing for their families and employing Americans doing the same.

I hope to create policies that empower our small businesses to gain access to capital, innovate, and thrive. I'm especially excited to fight for our small business owners as the Ranking Member of the Small Business Subcommittee on Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Workforce Development.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO THE ASIAN-AMERICAN ENTREPRENEURS READING THIS RIGHT NOW?**

Never give up on your dream. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit our small businesses hard, but we will get through this. Apply for a Paycheck Protection Program loan, and use the SBA and other resources to help. I know it's been tough, but don't give up.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK THE OUTLOOK IS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES RIGHT NOW?**

More than 19,000 small businesses across California have closed due to COVID-19, and I've heard stories of many more barely hanging on. Our small business owners are following public health, state, and local guidelines to protect the public health and safety of their employees and customers while doing all they can to stay afloat.

I'm committed to making sure the federal government provides direct relief to small businesses that need it and promotes policies that allow our small business owners to get back on their feet.

**HOW WELL DO YOU THINK THE FEDERAL PAYCHECK PROTECTION PROGRAM (PPP) WORKED IN EXTENDING A LIFELINE TO SMALL BUSINESSES? WHAT MORE SHOULD CONGRESS DO, IF ANYTHING, TO HELP MAIN STREET GET BACK ON ITS FEET?**

The Paycheck Protection Program has been a lifeline for so many small businesses during COVID-19. We must ensure that as much money as possible can go directly to provide relief to our struggling businesses and families.

As we deploy the COVID-19 vaccines nationwide and reopen the economy, we must also remember many of our businesses are still closed or operating at reduced capacity. That is why I introduced a bipartisan bill, HR 953, to create a grant program to help our small businesses gain access to COVID-19 tests, PPE, and other resources to help them safely reopen and stay open.

**KNOWING THAT THE VACCINE IS BECOMING MORE READILY AVAILABLE, WHAT'S THE TIMELINE ON GETTING THE ECONOMY BACK ON TRACK?**

The best way to help small businesses is to allow them to safely and fully reopen. I recently signed onto a bipartisan \$160-billion COVID-19 vaccine distribution package and introduced HR 953 with Rep. Abigail Spanberger (VA-07) that would help small businesses receive PPE and other supplies to safely reopen. In California, we have seen our vaccine distribution badly mishandled. At least one-third of the allotted vaccines given to the state are unaccounted for. I hope we can work to quickly distribute vaccines while helping our communities reopen.



Representative  
Young Kim (R-CA)

“

I hope to make a positive impact in Congress and work together with my colleagues to ensure Americans of all walks of life can achieve their dream like I did.”

**HOW SHOULD CONGRESS BALANCE THE CONCERN OF HEAVING MORE FINANCIAL LIABILITIES ON FUTURE AMERICANS WITH THE NEED TO PUSH ECONOMIC RECOVERY FOR MAIN STREET?**

We must make sure our COVID-19 relief is targeted so we can directly help struggling small businesses and families. That is why I am committed to making sure the nearly \$1 trillion in unspent federal COVID-19 relief can go to our communities before passing another massive stimulus package. The best way to help small businesses is to allow them to reopen fully for business and give them the tools to implement safety measures.

**AS THE RANKING MEMBER OF THE SMALL BUSINESS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INNOVATION, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, WHAT POLICY INITIATIVES ARE A PRIORITY THIS YEAR? ARE THERE ANY THAT WOULD ATTRACT BIPARTISAN SUPPORT? WHAT'S ON THE TABLE FOR THE BROADER COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS OF WHICH YOU'RE A MEMBER?**

I'm excited about working to develop strategies to prepare our workforce and economy for the jobs

of tomorrow. I think this is an area where both Republicans and Democrats can work together. All of us have constituents who need help transitioning to the jobs of the future, and I hope we can come together to develop plans to educate our children in STEM fields and help transition people currently working to new jobs where advancement is available.

I just had a nice conversation with my counterpart, Representative Crow – Chairman of the Subcommittee – to find areas where we can both agree on. I think the Subcommittee will try to find common ground on apprenticeship opportunities for small businesses. One of my priorities in the Subcommittee is to ensure that the Small Business Innovation Research (SSIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (SBTT) programs are streamlining the development and commercialization of new technologies. As we look to reauthorize the SSIR and SBTT programs, we should take a closer look at ways of making them more effective working with private enterprises. ■

*Alfredo Ortiz is the President and CEO of the Job Creators Network. Congresswoman Young Kim is a freshman member of the U.S. House of Representatives serving California's 39th District. She is a former small business owner.*

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# A SOLUTION TO GUESTROOM NOISE

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## The Task

Lido House is well-positioned to enjoy Newport Beach’s vibrant atmosphere, bustling marina, white-sand beaches... and the noise that accompanies them. Within just 6 weeks of their grand opening, the hotel received noise complaints in 90% of guest comments.

## The Trial

Based on the recommendation of another Marriott property, McClinton Heil, Director of Room Operations, reached out to MODIO. The trial began in the hotel’s most challenging location: 14 rooms near the popular rooftop bar. Prior to installation, 9 out of 10 occupants complained that noise affected their stay. During the first month of the trial, the property only received four noise complaints... and consistent praise for MODIO as a wonderful new amenity. Guest satisfaction and Medallia scores showed that noise had dropped from the number one issue to fifth place. The hotel subsequently purchased MODIO for all guest rooms.

## The Testimonials

Noise complaints are no longer an issue for the hotel and guests are excited about the additional environmental control.



### Great Every Time

Due to a long-term project, I’ve been staying at the Marriott weekly since September.

The accommodations are great, as the furnishings are in great shape (the hotel is new), and housekeeping does a really good job keeping the room clean. Unlike other hotels, I’m able to get the temperature set just as I like it. Oh, and the white noise machines are a brilliant addition!



### Amazing Hotel! Awesome Location!

Comfy bed, and they also have a “white noise” machine, which helped me sleep like a baby. Especially nice since I had to leave at 5 a.m. for a flight back home.

The Lido has confidently recommended MODIO to several other properties. “Who knew there was such a quick and easy solution to noise problems,” said Heil. His advice to other properties? “Take 20 of your rooms and just try it. Once you see the results, it’s a no-brainer!” To learn more about MODIO sound masking technology, visit [www.modio.audio](http://www.modio.audio).



## Marriott Autograph-Lido House

Newport Beach, CA

# Challenging hotel real estate taxes during COVID-19

by GAURI SAMANT

**T**HE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS HIT NUMEROUS COMMERCIAL PROPERTY SECTORS HARD. THE U.S. hospitality and lodging industry has been among the hardest hit. Hotel owners and operators cannot fully control how the pandemic has decimated the business income from their hotel properties. There is, however, an opportunity for hotel owners to mitigate some of their losses during the pandemic. Hotel owners whose business income has been crippled by the COVID-19 crisis should aggressively seek reductions in the property tax assessed values for their hotels in 2021.

## ASSESSING THE ASSETS

For property tax purposes, most states only assess the market value of the real estate (the land and building) of a hotel property. Personal property (such as fixtures, furniture, and equipment), as well as intangible assets (such as goodwill, existing contracts, reputation, and hotel franchise), are generally not subject to property taxation. In setting the assessment of a hotel, assessors may consider the income stream attributable to the real estate of the hotel during the year immediately prior to the assessment year. Identifying and segregating the amount of a hotel's income that is attributable to the taxable real property vs. non-taxable personal property and non-taxable intangible assets involves complex appraisal methodologies. Nonetheless, if a hotel's business income has declined precipitously due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a very strong argument that the market value of the hotel has also drastically declined as of 2021. The assessed value of hotel properties should be adjusted to reflect the drastic changes in the hotel market, as well as the steep decline in net operating income because of COVID-19.

The coronavirus and its outbreak have beleaguered the U.S. hospitality sector, and has had disastrous consequences for the hotel and lodging market. The initial outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in Wuhan, China, was first reported to the World Health Organization's China Country Office on Dec. 31, 2019. Shortly thereafter on March 13, 2020, the U.S. government declared COVID-19 a

national emergency. Hotel guests have since cancelled or indefinitely postponed traveling due to concerns of contracting or spreading the coronavirus, sending a shock to the viability of the hospitality industry. Government restrictions designed to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, social-distancing guidelines, and limitations on social gatherings, have further stifled opportunities for hotels to host weddings, conferences, and corporate functions. Meager occupancy at hotels has resulted in a dearth of revenue for hotel owners. Meanwhile, many hotel operating expenses – such as insurance and mortgage payments – have remained steadfast. Certain hotel expenses have even increased during the pandemic, such as the cost for frequent sanitation and cleaning in guestrooms and common areas. A cascade of U.S. hotel properties, including prominent and luxury hotels, have been or will be transferred into receivership or foreclosure due to these devastating circumstances.



## CHALLENGING THE ASSESSMENTS

If the property tax assessment of your hotel does not reflect the market value of the real property of the hotel as of the assessment date, then be prepared to challenge it. There are several steps you should consider before challenging the real estate tax assessment of your hotel.



**Carefully review the property tax statement** of your hotel property for the 2021 assessment. There is nearly always a deadline, which varies by state and/or local jurisdictions, to file a property tax appeal challenging the assessed value of your property. If you miss that deadline, you are likely to lose your right to appeal. Consider engaging a property tax attorney to discuss how to preserve your property tax appeal rights, as well as how the pandemic has adversely impacted your hotel's business income and reduced the market value of your hotel in 2021.



**Carefully collect and prepare the financial data** that demonstrates how COVID-19 has adversely impacted your hotel's occupancy, revenues, average daily rates, and net operating income, but confirm that the assessor will keep your confidential financial information protected before sharing that data with the assessor.



**Become knowledgeable of sales of similarly situated hotel properties** that are located proximate to your hotel and were sold during the COVID-19 pandemic. If the recent sale prices of other such hotels are lower than the assessed value of your hotel property on a per-key basis, that is another very strong indication that your hotel is over-assessed. Keep in mind, however, that the recently sold sales prices of other hotels presumably would include not only the transfer of taxable real property but also the transfer of non-taxable personal property and non-taxable intangible assets. Accordingly, even if the comparable sales prices are higher than the assessed value of your hotel property on a per-key basis, that does not necessarily mean your hotel is under-assessed.



**Continue to gather data to challenge subsequent assessment years.** The immediate future for the U.S. hospitality industry remains uncertain at best. New and more-transmissible variants of the coronavirus have recently emerged, and the vaccine rollout in the U.S. has been slower than predicted. It is uncertain when the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts will cease to threaten the viability of the U.S. lodging industry. The assessed value of your hotel property should be adjusted to reflect the volatility of the hotel market due to the COVID-19 crisis. If your assessor has not reduced the assessed value of your hotel property to reflect the drastic impact that COVID-19 has had on your hotel business operations, then be prepared to fight for the property tax relief that you deserve. ■

*Gauri Samant is a property tax attorney practicing with the law firm of Fredrikson and Byron, P.A., based in Minneapolis, MN. She has helped numerous property tax clients reduce the assessed value of their commercial properties through litigation and settlement negotiations. Gauri especially enjoys helping property owners appeal the property tax assessed value of hotel and motel properties due to the intricacies involved in segregating the nontaxable personal property and nontaxable intangible assets from the taxable real property value of a hotel.*



# Merger and acquisition:

a growth opportunity in the pandemic crisis

by LINCHI KWOK Ph.D

**W**HEN THE PANDEMIC HIT THE GLOBAL HOSPITALITY and tourism industry barely more than a year ago, some experts estimated that about 50% of the U.S. hotels would close. By September 2020, 34% of hotels in New York City were delinquent.

## WILL MORE HOTELS FILE FOR BANKRUPTCY IN 2021?

The number of businesses filing for bankruptcy went up nearly 20% in 2020. Surprisingly, only 77 hotels or gaming companies filed for Chapter 11 protection, down from 92 in 2019. It's plausible that some hotel owners received forbearance from their lenders when the pandemic started. Meanwhile, the U.S. Small Business Administration's emergency loans might also provide some buffer for hoteliers to deal with the crisis.

Unfortunately, not every hotel can survive such an unprecedented crisis beyond 2020. For example, the Bay Area had reported two hotel bankruptcies in January/February 2021 – one with more than \$500 million in debt and another with more than \$100 million in debt.

Although places like the U.S. and the UK finally reported fewer newly infected cases along with an increasing vaccination rate, the lodging industry is unlikely to see a full recovery until late 2023. Until then, more hotels will file for bankruptcy or need to find ways to consolidate their debts.

### WILL ONE PERSON'S LOSS BECOME ANOTHER'S GAIN?

Investors are ready to buy hotels; many are looking for bargains in a buyer's market. In March 2021, Blackstone Group Inc. and Starwood Capital Group agreed to pay \$6 billion to acquire Extended State America, Inc. The economy extended-stay hotel segment reported a 75.4% occupancy even during the pandemic, more than 20 percentage points higher than any other category.

Through acquisitions, hotels can gain immediate access to a market or a product. A merger can help companies combine resources, cut operation costs, and share organizational knowledge through consolidations. Plus, a merger will result in fewer competitors in the market.

Sonesta International Hotels was one of those companies that went on a massive acquisition spree in 2020. Besides 60 properties, Sonesta also owned a 34% equity stake of Service Properties Trust (SVC) before the pandemic, a REIT with a focus on hotel management for large hotel brands. Sonesta took the opportunity to acquire those hotels that couldn't make their minimum payments to SVC. Now, the hotel chain operates about 300 properties in eight countries.

### WHO WILL BE THE NEXT IN MERGER AND ACQUISITION?

The rumor resurfaced last summer about the IHG-Accor merger. IHG and Accor total more than 1.6 million rooms. By comparison, Marriott has about 1.4 million rooms. Because 60% of IHG's rooms are

in North America, and close to 50% of Accor's rooms are in Asia-Pacific, the merger would provide a complementary advantage for both. Operation-wise, the merger is expected to cut costs of \$118 to \$178 million, about 7% of IHG-Accor's projected operating earnings of 2022.

In 2015, Hilton spun off its hotel properties into a REIT as a separate company. Hyatt began selling its \$1.5 billion worth of real estate in 2017. Both hotel chains are well-positioned financially. Hilton announced in March 2021 that its Hilton Grand Vacations would acquire Diamond Resorts, adding 92 leisure resorts to its portfolio. Will Hyatt be the next?

### IS IT TIME FOR HOTEL OWNERS TO BUY MORE PROPERTIES?

Possibly. Banks and hotel owners now offer buyers cheap rates and sometimes little money down to unload their unprofitable properties, some of whom even provide seller financing. On the flipside, a buyer's market does not favor the hotels in trouble if one wants to sell a hotel.

### MERGER AND ACQUISITION SHORT-TERM IMPACTS ON OWNERS AND OPERATORS

Brand acquisitions or mergers, or the change of a brand's ownership, might not create an immediate concern. Suppose you happen to run a franchised hotel whose brand just got acquired or absorbed by another big hotel chain. In that case, you have no say in the franchisor's decision. Terms, agreements, and brand expectations are unlikely to change in the short term.

The good news is you will have access to a larger reservation network and a bigger customer pool. Major hotel chains have been working hard for several years to encourage travelers to "book direct" on their brand website. Their efforts seem to have been effective. Moreover, "bigger" often means better when it comes to hotel loyalty programs. Marriott combined the Marriott-Ritz-Starwood program into one giant network called Bonvoy. Likewise, Accor's Le Club AccorHotels

Program was a creation of four loyalty programs: AccorHotels, Fairmont, Raffles, and Swissôtel. Imagine how big the IHG-Accor loyalty program would become if two chains merge into one.

A bigger network also can mean a better position when negotiating with the suppliers. Hotel owners and operators could possibly get better deals through the franchisor's procurement list.

### MERGER AND ACQUISITION'S LONG-TERM IMPACTS ON OWNERS AND OPERATORS

In the long term, the franchisor may want to roll out new brand standards or require additional renovations, meaning more cash is needed to keep the flag. Additionally, new ownership usually means reshaping the organizational culture, although it typically takes a long time for any organization to change its culture. When IHG acquired Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, many worried if Kimpton could maintain its brand identity among its loyal customers and franchisees.

A bigger franchisor could also become more powerful when negotiating new contracts and terms with the individual hotel owners or operators. Dealing with changes and a more powerful franchisor could be frustrating and more challenging for some.

If you are running an independent hotel and see your competitors are merged into a bigger network, you may expect tougher competition. The question becomes: Is it time to roll up the sleeves to fight against the "big fish" or to consider adding a flag to the hotel? ■



*Linchi Kwok Ph.D publishes viewpoints and articles in hospitality management and service marketing. His work has won several awards at academic conferences. He is an associate professor at the Collins College of Hospitality Management in Cal Poly Pomona and a visiting professor at Sun Yat-Sen University. Before moving to SoCal, Linchi worked at Syracuse University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Texas Tech University, and Marriott.*

# Leveraging technology to attract more guests and create a welcoming atmosphere

by BEN GRUITA

**IT USED TO BE THAT ALL A HOTEL** needed to be at max capacity was a clean room, meal offerings, and a TV with HBO. Some in the industry still think that's true, but that hasn't been sufficient for a long time. As someone who travels and stays in hotel rooms more than anyone ever should, I'll simply say that many hotels are offering facilities/services in ways that are outdated, inconvenient for the guest, or – perhaps worst of all given the COVID-19 pandemic – downright unsanitary. I am the guest who walks into his hotel room, pulls out a black light, and scrutinizes the place like a bad episode of *CSI*. And I'm not the only one; COVID-19 has turned us all into hyper-vigilant, germ-fighting individuals.

I could mention example after example of outdated cleaning and sanitization practices, but you're not reading this article to



be told what isn't working anymore. You want to know what will work now and in the future.

**THE BLEEDING EDGE**

Nearly all technology examples mentioned here can be performed by customers on their mobile devices. No expensive additional tech is needed for them or you. For example, augmented reality (AR) uses your phone's rear camera to show you objects on the screen as if they are real in that location. Think of placing a virtual couch in a room and walking around it. In real life, you're just walking around a space while looking at your phone screen but on your phone, you see a couch in that space. You can also still see everything around you. Now, if you have a computer and can work your way through something as simple as Word or Excel, you can incorporate many AR-provider's platforms.



When I book a room, I receive an email with the booking information, but you could add an invitation to download your mobile app and mention that the app allows guests to see how their room is professionally cleaned. Seeing your cleaning process can alleviate many COVID-related concerns. After downloading your app and using the AR features, guests are able to place a model of the room on their coffee tables at home to see a housekeeping "character" cleaning a generic room. Now when checking in, guests have a greater sense that their room is actually clean.

**FIRST-PERSON SERVICE**

Thanks to mobile check-in technology, you can use GPS and your app to notify your front desk staff of a guest's arrival BEFORE stepping on your property. Now, your staff can have reservation information ready without guests having to lift a finger. And if front-desk staff is busy, this makes things go faster. Your app can generate a QR code that staff can scan. Once scanned, a guest gets his key and is on his way.

Once checked in, your guest can have a virtual concierge appear in front of them on their phone screen. This concierge can "walk" them right to their room. On the way there, the customer can walk by your restaurant where an AR steak can be seen on a virtual grill or you can advertise your specials.

Now settling into their room, if a guest has any problems, she can easily open your app, click on the big button that says "Concierge," and someone appears like magic to address and remedy the problem. An incident log is generated for record-keeping and training purposes.

AR isn't new. In fact, the ideas and initial tech have been around for almost 30 years. What is new is that the little phone we all carry in our pockets can do more than ever before.

**POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

Using nothing more than the phones in their pockets, your customer can now take a full 360-degree copy of your hotel room. The online reviews we've all seen with the 2D pictures are getting a facelift. Soon, your guests will be able to post a full picture of your room. That dirty toilet

or vanity will sink a properties reputation faster than you can blink. What used to be discussed as something in the future is now a reality. I've owned AR glasses for more than a year, and – by connecting them to my phone and tracking my fingertips – I'm able to do everything I would normally do on my phone in the air in front of me. For example, a virtual version of Waze shows up when I drive, and I can move it anywhere I want simply by grabbing it. If a call comes in, I can press a non-existent button in the air to answer or decline. If I want to watch TV, I can do so in my glasses and I'm looking at a simulated 120-inch screen with surround sound coming out of the glasses frames. Remember you read about the customer being "walked" to their room via a virtual concierge? With the glasses, I can now see that and my hands are free. That interactive AR food menu now looks even better with more realistic interactions.

You want higher occupancy? A better way to train your staff? How about ways that will help you stand out from the competition? I just listed a few. Pricing can range from free all the way up to numbers with many zeros, and no one is forcing you to change. But for those of you who see that your customer is changing, congratulations! Now, what are you going to do about it?

Ultimately, I want you to know this: Changes are coming, and you can't do anything to stop them. Why would you want to? Why wouldn't you want happier guests and staff? ■



*Throughout his IT services career, Benjamin Gruita has helped global brands explore and create engagement plans utilizing emerging technologies. His approach*

*focuses on technology such as AR/VR/XR, and his clients receive insights into hardware that normally isn't yet available to consumers. He has been a featured speaker at Yale University, MIT, Facebook, Oculus, and a guest on Fox Business Network. Benjamin often donates his services to local and international non-profit organizations focused on helping individuals improve their situation, and he can be reached at [bengruita@yahoo.com](mailto:bengruita@yahoo.com).*

# AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION

 2.5-MINUTE READING TIME



Vice Chair Vinay Patel brought attendees up to speed on AAHOA's current advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C.



AAHOA held its first in-person Town Hall of the year at the Hotel, Motel, Restaurant Supply Show of the Southeast in Myrtle Beach in March.



Chairman Biran Patel speaks with a member at the Town Hall.



AAHOA Chairman Biran Patel delivered an AAHOA update on upcoming events and happenings at the Town Hall.



(From left) AAHOA Vice Chair Vinay Patel, South Carolina Regional Director Chetan (Chet) Patel, North Carolina Regional Director Akshat Patel, AAHOA Chairman Biran Patel, and Washington DC Area Regional Director Sandip Patel were on hand at AAHOA's first in-person event of the year.

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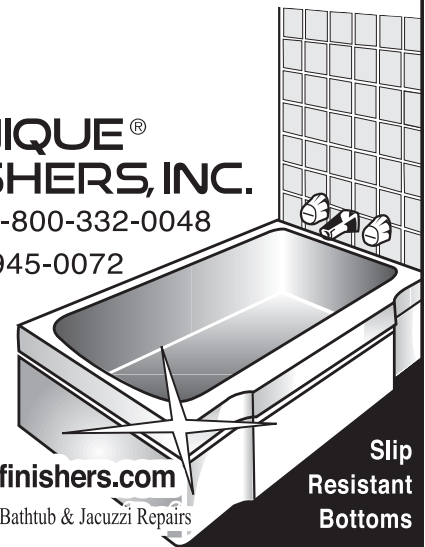
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