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Columnist: Here's how the Coast can frame our response to the pandemic

BY JOE O'KEEFE, SPECIAL TO THE SUN HERALD

A frequent observation on the Coast these days is: we made it through Hurricane Katrina, so we will make it through this pandemic.

The human toll of the two tragedies is roughly similar thus far. The confidence fits like a glove. Anyone willing to bet against a Coast comeback should be barred from a casino.

Still, framing the economic destruction of a pandemic as comparable to that wrought by a hurricane is a mistake, one that could lead to inaction, fateful missteps, and inefficient use of public investment in the months ahead.

Hurricanes devastate infrastructure and homes. They take lives and impel some residents to leave. They destroy businesses. However, they rarely change business models. Enterprises ranging from airplanes to grocery stores worked essentially the same way before and after Hurricane Katrina.

Many business models must and will change now, even if a vaccine for the coronavirus is found. Shifts toward drive-thru food service, social distancing in restaurants, health screening for public-facing employees, mobile phone gaming, and reduced seating in airplanes, buses, and concert halls, among others, may prove irreversible.

Some of the key economic questions will be how the health risks to consumers and the legal liability risks of companies will be distributed, and who will referee risk allocation. AirBnB, which once seemed unstoppable, has already been knee-capped by those issues.

It is not far-fetched to imagine an older gambler inquiring about which casino might have better ventilation, access to fresh air and sunlight, and transparent procedures for certifying that slot machine handles are sanitized.

Nor is it far-fetched to imagine hotels touting more off-site events so tourists can social distance in spontaneous, less stilted ways. Such changes, in turn, could change the premium that the Coast puts on walkability of streets around hotels and convention centers.

We will be lucky if steps such as hand-sanitizer and social distancing tape lines suffice. But it would be unwise to presume those steps will give the Coast a much-needed leg up on competitors for conventions such as Mobile, Savannah, or Nashville. The entire country is weathering a Category Five storm, and other markets will be desperate to rebound through savvy, targeted investments and public policy innovation.

As soon as we get past the emergency phase of this pandemic, a formal, well-funded Coast initiative - such as a commission, series of focus groups, or charrette - should be launched.

Its mandate should be two-fold. First, it should aim to scour the rest of the nation for best practices - not primarily from government agencies, but from the millions of businesses experimenting and adapting to find efficient, far-sighted solutions to this challenge.

Second, it should generate actionable steps mindful of the Coast's strengths and weaknesses, assign responsibility to stakeholders, and propose research for the future. Coast leaders, for example, have already identified work-at-home and distance learning as trends that could gel with our real estate market. Perhaps now is the time to turbocharge that message and strategy.

We can do this. It need not cost a fortune. More than a century ago, the residents of a town called Lynchburg responded to yellow fever epidemics by renaming their city Ocean Springs — a low-cost, market-driven step meant, in part, to appeal to those fearful of the disease. The decision helped its tourism economy.

The Coast need not go about changing names this time. But it does need to act with foresight and urgency. A “return to normalcy” is a monster truck of a bad idea. We need to act quickly to get ahead of competing markets by drawing on our resilience and ingenuity.

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