

Austin Music Venues and Musicians Ask City for Financial Relief.

By: Camila Llorente

It was a typical Friday and Flamingo Cantina owner Angela Tharp was arranging all her deliveries to be ready for South by Southwest. But right after finishing all of her duties, Austin Mayor Steve Adler canceled the event.

"Holy cow. Now what?" Tharp said. "I just bought all this stuff and prepared it in a big way because it's one of our biggest events of the year, and then we're shut down."

Over six months later, Flamingo Cantina has yet to reopen. Other legacy venues around Austin, like One-2-One Bar, have closed permanently. Live music venue owners and musicians are worried that losing long-standing Austin businesses is becoming a trend because of the pandemic. Which prompted the Austin City Council to try to find an economic lifeline for struggling businesses at its Oct. 15 meeting.

"This is a great opportunity for the city to step up and really prove that they mean it when they say Austin, Texas is the Live Music Capital of the World," said John Pointer, a musician and 11-time Austin MusicAwards winner.

Music venues were the first to close when COVID-19 swept the country in March. In July, the Hobby School of Public Affairs at the University of Houston surveyed Austin businesses and found out that 62% of live music venues could close by October. These closures could have a significant impact on the city's culture, economy and title. Today, venue representatives and musicians are still waiting for the city's financial relief.

"The reason why people come to Austin is because of the music scene. The city knows that," said Guy Forsyth, a singer-songwriter. "Its own financial studies showed that the arts are the prime income generator of the city. That doesn't mean the artists make that. That means the city's making it, the hotels, alcohol, Uber drivers, all the different things that surround it."

Austin City Council approved the relief program's initial guidelines under the Save Austin's Vital Economic Sectors (SAVES) initiative at its Oct. 15 meeting. This relief will only focus on business owners' long-term solutions. Since these businesses need a quick response for help, the council created a separate business preservation fund. Businesses qualified for the SAVES initiative can use \$1.5 million from this second fund for immediate relief and hire legal and financial professionals who can help them.

"I think the interest is to get this going as quickly as we can, especially with respect to somebody who is in an emergency situation and thinks they are not going to last four weeks," Adler said at

the meeting. "And for that person, we want to be able to get emergency relief to tide them over for the shortest period of time."

Musicians such as Pointer, Jeska Bailey and Forsyth agreed that the \$1.5 million is a good first step for Austin music venues. They also proposed that revenue from the hotel occupancy tax goes to venues as well.

"Venues will bring in more hotel occupancy tax because we will continue to draw people to Austin as the world's live music capital," Pointer said. "And some of that, some of the taxes that tourists are paying when they come to see the live music, we brag so much about, you know, it makes sense that some of that capital would go back into the live music."

Venue owners and musicians are concerned about who will be distributing these funds to the music venues. Tharp believes that the city should reconsider other criteria, such as whether an establishment is a legacy venue, one that has been part of the city for more than 15 years. Since Flamingo Cantina is one of them, Tharp prefers this to the city throwing the funds away in a lottery system.

"The city offered a couple of different grant opportunities, I applied for both ...we got turned down for both. And that was pretty disappointing," Tharp said. "We've put in the work over a period of time and with very little help from the city. And we feel like that had to count for something, you know?"

Live music venues are much more than a stage for performing Austin musicians.

"(They) are an incredible gym for working out as a musician," Pointer said. "It's where we build our strength."

Losing the venues will mean new talents won't get the opportunity to work on their craft and get better at it. It will be, as Bailey said, "killing the culture of the city."

"If you don't have the venues, you don't have a platform, you don't have an incubator, then you no longer have a springboard for people like Carolyn Wonderland, Eric Johnson, me, Bob Schneider, Stevie Ray Vaughan," Pointer said. "The reason that all of those people were able to make names for themselves is that they had a great place to work out ... the venues here in Austin."