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Puget Sound Economic Summit: Advancing an Equitable and Inclusive Recovery

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ECONOMIC SUMMIT at Bell Harbor International Conference Center delivers a MESSAGE OF HOPE Three-dozen live presenters – plus others who joined remotely – engaged nearly 2,000 viewers over three days last month for the first-ever Puget Sound Economic Summit. The hybrid event was held in partnership with World Trade Center Seattle at the gleaming, newly modernized Bell Harbor International Conference Center at Pier 66 on Seattle's waterfront.

Bell Harbor International Conference Center now offers 100,000 square feet of event space, advanced technology equipment and 180-degree panoramic views of Puget Sound. Were it not for COVID-19, the unveiling of the multimillion-dollar update of the facility – which is owned by the Port of Seattle – would have occurred through “a spectacular grand opening event,” said John Oppenheimer, CEO of Columbia Hospitality, which manages the venue.

Instead, a dynamic lineup of leaders from business, government and nonprofits addressed ways to advance an equitable and inclusive recovery from the pandemic via an engaging virtual event, streamed live from the Bell Harbor International Conference Center facility.



Puget Sound Business Journal Publisher and President Emily Parkhurst (left) moderated the “State of the Port” panel, with Commissioner Stephanie Bowman, Executive Director Stephen P. Metruck, and Managing Director, Aviation, Lance Lyttle. Photo by Alabastro Photography.

ALAN ALABASTRO

U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Dr. Raquel Bono, appointed to direct Washington state's COVID-19 response by Gov. Jay Inslee, has traveled across the state with the governor. "I was gratified to see the high level of health and medical expertise that you already had," Bono said, adding that she believes Washington will "continue to lead the rest of the country in how to live better with COVID-19."

Planning for 2021 and beyond is an overriding focus for Ben Minicucci, President of Alaska Airlines, and Stein Kruse, Group CEO of Holland America Group and Carnival UK.

"We had to put a stake in the sand because you've got to plan," said Minicucci. He added that "Right now we're modeling 20% down" for 2021.

"Work is going to transform because of this, and maybe that was coming, but this thing lit the fuse," said Minicucci. "I do think face-to-face is still necessary; you can only use so many virtual means. We're using the equity of existing relationships right now with virtual – but you miss all that little banter before a meeting."

For the cruise industry, "the messaging to our guests right now is relatively simple because they want to come back," said Kruse, "Future demand for cruises is quite solid."

"I am very positive on the long-term future of Seattle's cruise industry, which is mostly directed toward what happens in Alaska," Kruse added. "But I cannot predict when exactly all that's going to happen."

Ensuring equity and inclusiveness in the recovery from the pandemic was the focus of the conference's first day.

"What makes me optimistic is the demand for justice and racial equity that we've seen in the last six months," said Burien Mayor Jimmy Matta. "People who identify as white are more aware of privilege and what it means, and people of color are demanding justice."

GSBA President and CEO Louise Chernin said she has been moved by "the incredible diversity of those who are in the streets protesting. It's not like the '60s, it's not so siloed," she said. "It's not just about what we need to do, but what have we not done to change things. And to start thinking that we can."

Many issues around equity intersect with technology. With virtual events "we can be more inclusive," Port of Seattle Commissioner Sam Cho said. "They can reduce barriers like transportation and access. We can be more global. There's no reason your keynote speaker can't call in from Sydney, Australia or Singapore."



KOMO News anchor Ryan Yamamoto (left) and Managing Director of Strategy for Confident Travel Initiative for The Boeing Company Pradeep Fernandes. Photo by Alabastro Photography.

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Virtual meeting platforms are expanding capabilities. “Amazon today is having a career fair. There are 20,000 attendees,” said Leasa Mayer, Board Member, Opus Agency and Former CEO, CRG Events, “maybe more. They have ... 2,000 one-on-one job seekers, each with an Amazon career counselor. They’re making it happen.”

Many companies are now using Remo, a live videoconferencing platform. “It is so fun – it is the closest thing to in-person networking that we had experienced since COVID hit,” said Emily Cantrell, Director, World Trade Center Seattle, in a conversation with Emily Parkhurst. “You enter a virtual room; there are all these tables and chairs set up and you double click on a chair and sit down,” Cantrell said. “You can bounce around from table to table, interact with people in small groups.”

Remo, in fact, was used for afternoon virtual networking sessions all three days of the economic summit.

Mayer noted that tech companies are working hard to learn from the world of role-play games in planning virtual events. “The NBA fan zone is using Microsoft Teams and they’ve accomplished some amazing experiences,” she said. “That feeling like you’re in a fan zone and hearing the people around you cheering,” and sponsors are able to engage viewers in rewarding ways.

“It’s a little harder to get the sponsors to buy in,” said Mayer. “But once they do, they see the value. For example, the tradeshow booth. It’s not everyone’s favorite job, to staff the booth. But now they can have a whole army of people taking in leads as they come in digitally, because there are no limits.”

Many innovative things are coming out of what we’re all going through, said Chernin. “Disabled people can work from home, in good paying jobs. It opens up a world of opportunity. We were very rigid in our 9-to-5 workplaces.” When the pandemic struck, though, companies had to offer more flexible schedules. “We found out we could do it,” she said.

Chernin noted that “certainly our restaurants have had to change. Who would have thought Canlis would offer takeout meals, and at a lower price? Or the bars; first it was just the cocktail fixings. Now it’s the entire cocktail,” Chernin added. “Having pickup, ordering online and home deliveries – think what this will mean for people who are housebound, who are older or don’t drive, or have little kids. It’s happening in so many businesses. We certainly know in medicine; telemedicine has just taken off.”

And then there’s the zoo’s Call of the Wild program, “in which you can basically invite one of our animals to your Zoom call, to be one of the players or one of the presenters” in your meeting, said Alejandro Grajal, president and CEO of the Woodland Park Zoo. The idea arose early in the pandemic, he said. He credited one of his “very creative teams” with the idea.

As we head into our first full winter of COVID, travel trends can be hard to predict.

“I know everyone’s sick of hearing that it was the summer of the road trip,” said Ali Daniels, Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for Visit Seattle, “but I really think it’s the two to three years of the road trip. You can control your environment, and you get to travel with your bubble that you have been quarantining with this whole time. It’s all about safety. It’s a personal journey for everyone through this pandemic.”

“I would add that they drive to someplace that’s less dense,” said Carla Murray, COO of The Americas - Western Region, Marriott International. “Our highest performing assets right now are in the mountains or on the California coast - remote places. As long as COVID is with us, I think we’ll keep seeing the trend where entire families are traveling.”

Recovery funds have been earmarked for encouraging local travel. King County has awarded Visit Seattle \$8 million in recovery tourism funds, in partnership with Seattle Southside Regional Tourism Authority. “So we’ve been working countywide to promote what’s in our backyard. We want people to travel local first, and why not put your money back into your own economy?”



Seattle Kraken CEO Tod Leiweke joined the “Creating Inclusive Cities Through Tourism” panel with GSBA CEO Louise Chernin, and Woodland Park Zoo CEO Alejandro Grajal. Photo by Alabastro Photography.

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Downtown Seattle's business district, long beset by crime and homelessness, has also taken a major hit during COVID. Todd Leiweke, CEO of Seattle Kraken, sees that as temporary. "We've made one of the biggest bets that's ever been made in this city," he said. "When we add it all up, close to \$2 billion of private investment is being made in the arena, the team and the training center in Northgate."

"We want to give a reason for every man, woman and child in our whole community to come to a building and celebrate something," said Leiweke. "This building (the former Key Arena) was left for dead. A long time ago, it stood for a great symbol of our future and it's going to again."

Looking past the COVID era, "We as a community are going to come out stronger," said Grajal. "Seattle has gone through holes before. And we come up a lot more diverse, a lot more resilient. I believe at the same time next year, we're going to see a different tone. We're going to come out of this hole – and once you come out of a hole you have a horizon, and the horizon is going to be fantastic."

COVID-19 coupled with racial injustice and civil unrest has forced us all to make changes. What developments and innovations have you seen this year that you believe will live on long-term?

Alejandro Grajal, President & CEO, Woodland Park Zoo: It has been fascinating to see how most of the cultural sector – that is arts, science and heritage institutions – have transitioned to digital, especially as so many of us had to close our facilities or completely change the way we operate in physical spaces. But it's too short-sighted to say "digital" is the development to pay attention to here. To me, digital is a tool, but the trend behind it that I think might really stick around is this new spirit of rapid iteration and innovation and responsiveness. Particularly at a time of fast, seismic changes in our social fabric. Woodland Park Zoo is more than 120 years old, and we have so many well-loved traditions that have lasted for years, if not generations. We care for animals for the length of their lives and manage conservation efforts over the span of decades. So it has been inspiring to see my team mobilize and work suddenly on this rapid timeline and at a pace of innovation that we've never embraced before. I sense a desire from everyone here to keep this new culture of experimentation and iteration complementing our lifelong and generational work toward the environment.

Bookda Gheisar, Sr. Director of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion,

Port of Seattle: Note: I'd like to preface my responses by saying that I think it's irresponsible to talk about the COVID-19 pandemic without also addressing the simultaneous racial justice and economic crises that we, as a nation, are currently struggling with. My answers will reflect and acknowledge these multiple, overlapping, and intersecting struggles. Video calls and working remotely have proven to be a very effective and productive way to work, and I imagine they've indefinitely changed our ideas about what "going to work" looks like. Additionally, I think the pandemic has required many of us to be hyperaware of our health and the health of others. Wearing masks, social distancing, plexiglass barriers, are all things that will likely live on in some capacity because they help prevent the spread of illness, not just COVID-19. Lastly, reporting and analysis of the affects of the pandemic have drawn attention to and exposed the underlying and ever-present racial and systemic inequities of our society. They have shown people how an acute incident - like this pandemic - deepens and exacerbates existing structural failures. For instance, African American and Latinx communities are getting infected and dying at disproportionately higher rates than whites, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) small-business owners have been forced to shut down at alarmingly high rates.

What metrics are you watching? What data are you most interested in and following?

Stein Kruse, Group CEO of Holland America Group and

Carnival UK: Through the help of our advertising and promotional partners we are reviewing and digesting many surveys and studies on cruise and travel patterns, as well as the ongoing evolution of concerns among travelers. There is much research being done that helps us understand what the traveling and cruising public are thinking in all of our markets and this is very important for us as we make strategic decisions about the marketing of our cruises. Cruise Critic, for example, in the U.S. published a poll that indicates that nearly 70% of respondents will book or already have booked a future cruise. Additional partners have provided general travel research and other cruise indicators that point to a solid demand environment post COVID. But to supplement this foundation of knowledge, we are certainly watching the early success with the other shore-side social gathering venues and events, as well as progress being made in other travel and hospitality sectors such as resorts, theme parks and visitor sites. We also will be watching our sister brands Costa in Italy and AIDA in Germany as they restart cruising. There is no better metric than to understand and see what is working to successfully operate a cruise today and fortunately we have one sister brand, Costa, that has begun to cruise and one, AIDA, that will begin soon.

What is one silver lining you have found in COVID-19?

Mayor Jimmy Matta, City of Burien: I have witnessed our community coming together even more than ever during these times. We are strengthening relationships and figuring out the ways in which we can help each other.

What gives you hope for the future?

Steve Metruck, Executive Director, Port of Seattle: I am proud of our employees and partners for their creativity and commitment to values. I have long believed that diversity makes us stronger and helps us make better decisions by bringing forward more perspectives and talent. Our society leaves too many talented contributors on the sideline or throws up artificial barriers that make it difficult for underserved communities to be part of decision making. I am extremely optimistic that their voices will be heard. The resiliency of our workforce in face of all the challenges of 2020 inspire me. I believe that we will be a stronger organization because of what we have gone through. The best community, corporate, and government responses to COVID-19 should become our roadmap for the next crisis. For example, today we see communities in our region grappling with a season of unprecedented wildfires. We now have better tools to create short term shelter, communicate remotely using technology, and crowdsource supplies. I feel we will be better equipped for the next crisis because of what we've learned responding to COVID-19.

Carla Murray, COO, The Americas - Western Region, Marriott International, Inc.: Better appreciation for the freedom of travel when it returns. A retooled business model where flexibility is key. Less confined by convention.

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