

Nonprofits feeling lodging crunch Finding short-term stays for guests ‘has become a major problem’

By Justin Criado, Editor
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Nonprofits are feeling the effects of inadequate lodging options, according to Telluride Theatre Artistic Director Sasha Cucciniello. She talked about the unexpected pandemic problem during Monday’s intergovernmental meeting, during which she explained essentially every nonprofit in town is having a hard time finding short-term lodging for visiting guests, volunteers and seasonal employees. “I’m here representing a large group of nonprofits, some who are also here today. We’ve all come together with a shared issue of lodging for our visiting artists, instructors, filmmakers, speakers, musicians and scientists, as well as seasonal staff and volunteers,” Cucciniello said. “During COVID, I started a weekly meeting for the large arts nonprofits in town, and we just Zoomed together to commiserate and just share our COVID miseries and grants ideas and all of that. As things started to progress, we came together and our major issue that all of us were facing was this short-term lodging. Over the last two years, this has become a major problem. It grew and grew and grew. And we started to include other nonprofits as well, not just arts organizations. Currently, 15 nonprofits are working together to create awareness and have come together in this major collaborative effort.”

As of Monday, the Wilkinson Public Library also shared similar lodging concerns, as the Telluride institution hosts events featuring visiting speakers, Cucciniello explained. The nonprofit partners recognize the over-arching housing issue in the area but still wanted to make local elected officials aware of the growing concern.

“We’re trying to share resources and best practices. It’s a huge problem for everyone. I want to make this really clear to everyone that we do not want to take anything away from any long-term housing issues or solutions, as we all are facing those as well. Our issues are specific to short-term visiting guest lodging,” she said. “These are not tourists. These are an important part of our employee base. Each of us have different needs, and each of us have different wants. And part of us coming together is creating this database of what each organization needs throughout the year and how we can fulfill those with a solution.”

Unfortunately, Cucciniello’s message wasn’t a forewarning, but a sobering look at the reality local nonprofits are now facing in providing diverse programming for the community.

“The change that we’ve seen over the last two years has been aggressive and impactful. The significant impacts on our budgets and our ability to offer cultural and intellectual events in the Town of Telluride. For example, MountainFilm experienced a \$40,000 budget shortfall. Because of this, the Sheridan Opera House also experienced a \$30,000 overage on this budget item. The Palm has had to cancel events. (Telluride Theatre) has had to cancel teachers and staff and all of those because of this. Beyond this, the time and effort that we all have to put into this to get short-term lodging has been major. Sage (Martin, Mountainfilm executive director) and Film Fest shares that they now have one person that just works on this year-round,” she said. “We bring this to you all today to just plant this seed. As you look to the future of our ecological makeup of the region, we just want to bring this to your attention, to have a healthy community to continue to bring world-class entertainment speakers and thinkers. This is part of the holistic way that our community works. It’s part of our ecological makeup. To have a healthy community, we need our events, we need these speakers, we need these film festivals. It’s a major economic driver as well. And just as you’re making these decisions for the community, just keep this in the back of your heads. This is what we as these nonprofits need to have to function and to continue to bring our events and speakers and scientists and teachers to town.”

Local officials were receptive to Cucciniello’s message and suggested she also include local athletics in the conversation moving forward.

“Was athletics thought about at all because there's this other element out there of some of our athletic groups in order to have teams come here, there's also a similar issue with visiting referees and all that stuff,” Telluride Mayor DeLanie Young proposed.

Cucciniello agreed it would be beneficial to talk with athletic groups as well and include as many people as possible or organizations that are similarly affected.

“I will reach out to some of the athletics to see if that's something that we can bring into the fold. We do not want to be exclusive. This is a problem that's facing all of us, so I think this is the time that we all want to dance together to try to find some creative solutions,” she said.

Mountain Village Mayor Laila Benitez, who was recently named the executive director of the San Miguel Resource Center, explained finding short-term lodging is also an issue for the center.

“I just wanted to selfishly say on behalf of the San Miguel Resource Center, if you could add us to that list, we'd like to be at the table to brainstorm. This is something that impacts us greatly as well,” she said.