Taking A Break, Returning To ‘My Old Job’

By the time you read this column, I will have announced my intention to run for mayor of the City and County of Honolulu, hoping to return to the office I was elected to twice before.

Besides the many people who have urged me to run, the catalyst was the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on Hawai‘i’s economy, unemployment, tax revenues and a host of other conditions going to the core of our quality of life. It pains me to see so many in our community suffering in more ways than one.

The pandemic appears to be easing, at least judging by the very low number of new cases. The governor and mayors are gradually allowing the opening of public places, first the beaches and parks, then the malls, and now more business types. Despite these encouraging signs, we still have to be vigilant in adhering to strict health protocols including social distancing, the wearing of masks, and other measures to prevent a COVID-19 flare-up.

From the perspective of the visitor industry, a return to some semblance of normalcy can’t come soon enough. This single industry generates $17.75 billion in annual spending. It yields almost $2.1 billion in taxes that fund public services. It employs 216,000 residents, directly and indirectly across many sectors, evidence of which we’re seeing in the face of this pandemic.

As we restart the visitor industry, essentially from ground zero, this presents an opportunity to reshape tourism to enhance its appeal, diversity and sustainability for generations to come. It’s about quality rather than quantity. But there are steps that must be taken before the industry begins to reopen.

Above all, we need a comprehensive plan for tourism’s recovery. Our government officials must establish and communicate clear, uniform timelines for tourism’s reopening, and provide the industry with information on new standards well before we begin reopening.

As of this writing, we’re still waiting for that plan. And the quarantine, of course, has now been extended through June 30 and into July.

This is where the mayor can play an influential role in the economy, serving as a bridge between the public and private sectors, providing essential government leadership and coordination where needed, and giving voice to the response efforts. I’ve had ample experience in this regard: in my roles during a major sewage spill in Waikīkī, pulling us through the economic recession of 2008 and beyond, establishing rail transit (which every mayor since Neal Blaisdell tried to do and which costs soared during the 10 years I have been out of City Hall) and in other crises, major and minor.

Right now, in my role as head of Hawai‘i Lodging & Tourism Authority, the largest tourism trade organization in the state, we have drafted a plan that provides guidance to our hotel and business members once they resume operations. In the absence of any government leadership, we are acting now because lodging operations need time to bring their employees back on board, train them on new operating procedures and complete necessary upgrades to accommodate new health guidelines. That’s why the governor and mayors must set a definitive target date for resuming tourism, accompanied by acceptable standards — well in advance of that scheduled reopening.

The hospitality industry’s guidelines include Mākaukau, or preparations to resume operations; Hana Pono, standard operating procedures; and Pane, responses to possible COVID-19 cases.

Mākaukau covers non-punitive employee health guidelines requiring employees to stay at home if they’re sick, mandatory training and social distancing covering valets, the front desk, common areas, recreational facilities, restaurants and so forth.

Hana Pono means the establishment and display of sanitizing procedures for all common areas, guest rooms and staff areas. Lodging properties will follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Environmental Protection Agency cleaning standards, with close attention paid to high-frequency contact areas.

Pane sets forth a hotel-centric action plan to respond to suspected COVID-19 cases. HLTA does not support the expulsion of a guest who may be ill; rather, we recommend that a health care provider and state Department of Health be contacted promptly.

Despite our best efforts, a tourism recovery will not be immediate or painless. Domestic airline arrivals have plummeted from 150 a day to under 15. Visitor arrivals have declined from 30,000 a day to a trickle numbering about 200. A hundred hotels statewide have suspended operations, while the remainder welcome a handful of guests, many of them airline crews. Thousands of local residents in tourism-related jobs are unemployed, giving us the unenviable ranking of third in the nation in unemployment.

Even with a start date, airlines will likely operate at 60 percent capacity for the foreseeable future because of social distancing seating. Hoteliers project occupancy to resume in the teens or 20s for the near-term, but stay low at 30-35 percent for the rest of the year. This will have a continuing ripple effect on employment and then across our entire economy for a sustained period.

It will take a while for us to get our economy back on track. But we must begin our work immediately before more time is lost to deliberation and indecision.

That’s why I’m running for mayor again just like Frank Fasi did successfully in his comeback in 1984. My campaign mantra is, “If you put me back at my old job, my mission is to put you back at yours.” With that said, I’ll be taking a pause for a cause from this column so I can embark on a quest to get Honolulu working again!