

# SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS TIMES

## Shuttered San Francisco hotels open doors to fire evacuees at a discount

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Most San Francisco hotels have been effectively closed since March due to the coronavirus pandemic, but another natural disaster is bringing some of them back online — the lightning-triggered wildfires raging throughout the Bay Area and state.

Some hotels are calling back furloughed staff and in some cases partially reopening for the first time in months to accommodate locals ordered to evacuate in nearly every Bay Area county. Hotels see the move as a way to support evacuees without a place to stay while also filling some rooms at a time of record-low occupancies citywide, even if the impacts to the bottom line are modest or negative.

"I know I'm going to lose money, I don't care," said Jon Handlery, general manager of the Handlery Hotel at Union Square. "What I'm doing pales in comparison with what they've gone through."

The Handlery Hotel suspended operations indefinitely this spring, as have more than 40% of San Francisco hotels since local bans on leisure travel stays took effect in March and remain in place. Since opening to evacuees Thursday at reduced rates — down to \$75 per night from the usual \$200 minimum — about 20 guests have booked stays with the offer.



TODD JOHNSON

The Handlery Hotel Union Square at 351 Geary St. opened its doors for the first time since April to offer discounted rooms to evacuees from record wildfires in Northern California.

The Bay Area is contending with three major groups of fires — the LNU Lightning Complex in the North Bay, the SCU Lightning Complex in the East and South Bay, and the CZU Lightning Complex in the south peninsula. Evacuation orders have displaced 140,000 people statewide and have been issued locally in every Bay Area county besides San Francisco and Contra Costa.

The 96-room Hotel Emblem in Union Square offered evacuees 20% of room rates and saw occupancy hit 40% over the weekend, double the rate while open in recent months for essential travelers. General Manager Brad Busby said he's hired back some furloughed staff to accommodate new guests, and also to comply with the emergency ordinance holding hotels to the strictest cleaning standards nationwide.

This week city health authorities officially modified restrictions on permissible hotel stays to include those displaced by the fires.

Hotel Council of San Francisco CEO Kevin Carroll estimated that citywide less than a dozen hotels are offering discount packages for evacuees.

Handlery said he will keep the promotion open until the fires are better contained and demand drops. After that he's unsure if the hotel will reopen before next year, skeptical of the near-term prospects for hotels unable to accommodate tourists and facing increased cleaning costs because of the Healthy Buildings ordinance.

"Now that I'm closed, I'm losing less than when I was open with one or two rooms occupied," Handlery said. "The worst thing to do would be to reopen and be in the same situations as right before I closed."

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