

Can the 'Melting Pot of Humanity' Survive This?

By Lauren Vespoli May 22, 2020

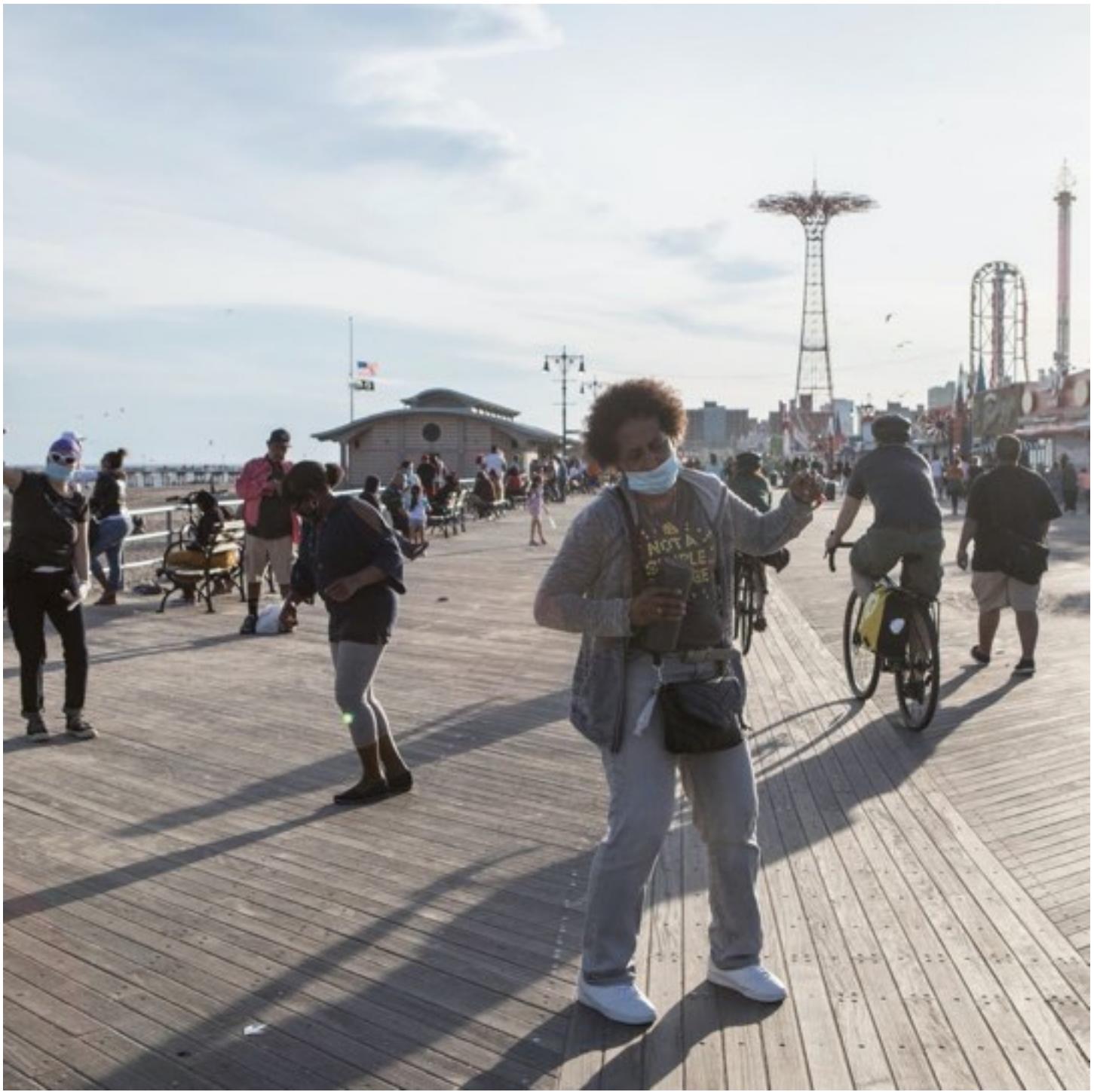
This summer was supposed to be big for Coney Island.

Memorial Day weekend would mark the 100th anniversary of the Wonder Wheel, Coney Island's 15-story feat of engineering in the form of a Ferris wheel, with swinging cars and panoramic views of both city and ocean. A three-day centennial celebration was planned, including a performance by the Broadway cast of "Wicked."

The festivities have been postponed. Instead, Dennis and Steve Vourderis, brothers and second-generation owners of [Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park](#), are taking part in an online video series called "Deno's Days of Distancing Together."

Dick Zigun, known locally as the "unelected mayor of Coney Island" and head of the nonprofit behind the popular [Mermaid Parade](#), has also pivoted. Now he's dressing in a top hat and "mayor" sash to give weekly "State of Coney Island" addresses online. Recently, he initiated a face mask design contest, possibly in an attempt to engage creative New Yorkers who would typically be making mermaid costumes around now.

Coney Island "represents popular culture," Mr. Zigun said. "It's a release valve for all of New York City." But whenever New York City begins to reopen, Coney Island's greatest strength might also be its biggest vulnerability. "Now we have this fear of each other's bodies, and touching, and sweat," said Dianna Carlin, the owner of Lola Star Boardwalk Boutique. "Coney Island is the melting pot of humanity, but are people going to want that?"

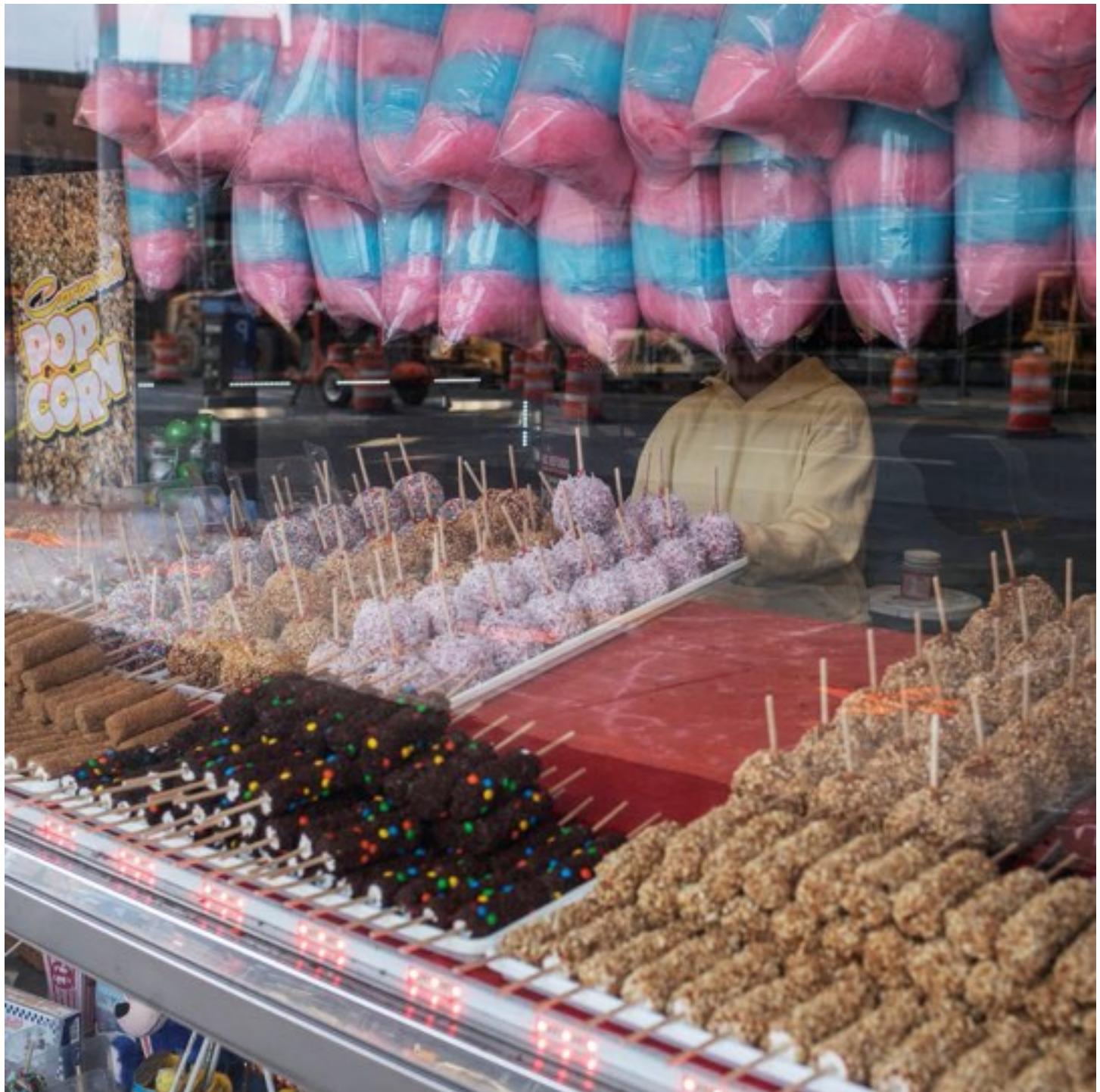


Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

They probably won't want to line up for Luna Park's four new attractions, including a log flume ride and a ropes course, which were planned for this summer. And Mayor Bill de Blasio's recent declaration that public beaches opening by Memorial Day Weekend was "[not in the cards](#)" has certainly not helped to inspire confidence.

Even in the best-case scenario, if beaches and nonessential businesses are eventually allowed to reopen under certain guidelines, it's hard to imagine "the People's Playground" making any kind of profit this summer without the wild abandon of summer crowds and long lines. It's the definition of a seasonal business.

"The whole economic ecosystem is unique," said Alexandra Silversmith, executive director of the [Alliance for Coney Island](#). "While some other neighborhoods hopefully will be able to fully reopen come fall, for Coney Island that doesn't really help with any of the 2020 costs these businesses will have incurred."



Eating junk food is still allowed, while social distancing, of course. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



"Coney Island has the advantage of fresh air, sunshine, and the beach." Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

For Ms. Carlin, who sells handmade T-shirts and accessories out of the boardwalk shop she's owned for 19 years, a socially distant summer could be the final nail in the coffin. Since the end of last year, she's been fighting a [400 percent rent increase](#) from Central Amusement International, a developer the city contracted to build Luna Park and manage a portion of the amusement district. (Its parent company, Zamperla, manufactures the park's rides.)

In December, Ms. Carlin led [a protest](#) against the increase on the steps of City Hall, and in February, Mayor Bill de Blasio [promised to help](#) on "The Brian Lehrer Show." But Ms. Carlin said she still hasn't reached an agreement with her landlord. As spring turns to summer, every week of lost business becomes more dire.

"If we're closed in June, and able to open in July, that's going to cut our revenue at least one-third of what we'd make for the year," Ms. Carlin said. She's been "contemplating whether it's time to walk away from the retail business" and instead focus on her [Dreamland Roller Disco](#) parties, whenever they will be safe for her to produce again.

[Ruby's Bar & Grill](#), which has been serving boardwalk customers since 1934, is another of the six small businesses facing the disaster of a rent hike and revenue loss. Michael Sarrel, the owner of Ruby's, estimated that business for 2020 would be down 75 percent from 2019. He applied for a loan with the Small Business Administration, but was denied. "It's a horror show," he said. "We can't afford to pay this rent. It's a hardship to begin with."



The current outdoor seating situation at Nathan's Famous. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

Ms. Carlin wondered if the city might step in and preserve the boardwalk as a cultural treasure of the city. Part of the immediate assistance might include, she suggested, waiving the rent for small businesses this season.

A concrete deal has yet to surface. "This administration is committed to maintaining Coney Island's character while making investments to ensure it's

resilient, equitable and prepared for the future," said Julia Arredondo, Mayor de Blasio's deputy press secretary.

Alessandro Zamperla, the president of Central Amusement International, wrote in a statement: "We look forward to hearing from the City of New York concerning an economic path forward." He conceded that the damages caused by the pandemic to Coney Island's seasonal small businesses had been "considerable."

Mr. Sarrel of Ruby's said he's still preparing for an eventual opening. He's installing new awnings, clearing the beer lines, and turning on the ice machine and freezers. Now that the weather is warmer, he is doing takeout on weekends, selling burgers, fried shrimp, and bottles of beer to masked pedestrians and bikers on the boardwalk, though business has been modest. "I think people are tentative about coming into any place now," he said.



Dianna Carlin runs the store Lola Star. Her rent has increased by 400 percent. Calla Kessler/The New York Times



Michael Sarrel, the owner of Ruby's, estimated that business for 2020 would be down 75 percent from 2019. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Meanwhile, Dennis Vourderis, of Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park, has been hashing out the logistics of what a reopened Deno's might look like this summer.

"We'll have a number of sanitizing crews that will go from ride to ride," wiping down anything visitors touch, he said. Other changes include hand-sanitizing

stations, a touchless ticketing system, and markers to keep guests six feet apart. Rides with individual cars, like the Wonder Wheel and the Spook-a-rama haunted house, will be the easiest to operate under social distancing guidelines, Mr. Vourderis said.

In mid-May, the Vourderis brothers opened two of their concession stands for takeout.

Eight of the park's 15 full-time staff are currently working, and the park is waiting to hire roughly 75 summer employees, should it get a green light of any sort. Mr. Vourderis said that the amusement park has been approved for several loans so far from the federal government's [Small Business Administration](#).

The canceled spring season, typically bustling with locals on weekends and film and television shoots on weekdays, has already taken a significant toll. In January, Deno's had announced [an expansion](#) that would nearly double the adult section of the park. They'd been planning to open the area next year, Mr. Vourderis said, but were counting on profits from this year to help with the financing. "We're hoping that either additional loans come through or we get to open our gates soon," he said. "Bear in mind that we only have five months to make this money."



Coney Island is "a release valve for all of New York City." Kirsten Luce for The New York Times



"When I stand out on the boardwalk and I'm looking out at the ocean, it just has such a calming and reassuring effect that everything will be OK." Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Mr. Zigun, meanwhile, is holding out hope that the annual Mermaid Parade, which drew an [estimated 800,000](#) people last year, will be able to take place in the fall (he has already announced two Broadway playwrights as parade King and Queen). But he's uncertain whether the Coney Island Circus Sideshow, or the Coney Island Museum, also run by his nonprofit, will be able to open this year.

Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated May 20, 2020

- **What are the symptoms of coronavirus?**

Common symptoms [include fever, a dry cough, fatigue and difficulty breathing or shortness of breath](#). Some of these symptoms overlap with those of the flu, making detection difficult, but runny noses and stuffy sinuses are less common. [The C.D.C. has also](#) added chills, muscle pain, sore throat, headache and a new loss of the sense of taste or smell as symptoms to look out for. Most people fall ill five to seven days after exposure, but symptoms may appear in as few as two days or as many as 14 days.

- **How many people have lost their jobs due to coronavirus in the U.S.?**

Over 38 million people have filed for unemployment since March. One in five who were working in February reported losing a job or being furloughed in March or the beginning of April, [data from a Federal Reserve survey released on May 14 showed](#), and that pain was highly concentrated among low earners. Fully 39 percent of former workers living in a household earning \$40,000 or less lost work, compared with 13 percent in those making more than \$100,000, a Fed official said.

- **How can I protect myself while flying?**

If air travel is unavoidable, [there are some steps you can take to protect yourself](#). Most important: Wash your hands often, and stop touching your face. If possible, choose a window seat. A [study from Emory University](#) found that during flu season, the safest place to sit on a plane is by a window, as people sitting in window seats had less contact with potentially sick people. Disinfect hard surfaces. When you get to your seat and your hands are clean, use disinfecting wipes to clean the hard surfaces at your seat like the head and arm rest, the seatbelt buckle, the remote, screen, seat back pocket and the tray

table. If the seat is hard and nonporous or leather or pleather, you can wipe that down, too. (Using wipes on upholstered seats could lead to a wet seat and spreading of germs rather than killing them.)

- **Is 'Covid toe' a symptom of the disease?**

There is an uptick in [people reporting symptoms of chilblains](#), which are painful red or purple lesions that typically appear in the winter on fingers or toes. The lesions are emerging as yet another [symptom](#) of infection with the new coronavirus. Chilblains are caused by inflammation in small blood vessels in reaction to cold or damp conditions, but they are usually common in the coldest winter months. Federal health officials do not include toe lesions in the list of coronavirus symptoms, but some dermatologists are pushing for a change, saying so-called Covid toe should be sufficient grounds for testing.

- **Can I go to the park?**

Yes, but make sure you keep six feet of distance between you and people who don't live in your home. [Even if you just hang out in a park, rather than go for a jog or a walk, getting some fresh air, and hopefully sunshine, is a good idea.](#)

- **How do I take my temperature?**

Taking one's temperature to look for signs of fever is not as easy as it sounds, as "normal" temperature numbers can vary, but generally, keep an eye out for a temperature of 100.5 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. If you don't have a thermometer (they can be pricey these days), there are [other ways to figure out if you have a fever, or are at risk of Covid-19 complications.](#)

- **Should I wear a mask?**

The C.D.C. has [recommended](#) that all Americans wear cloth masks if they go out in public. This is a shift in federal guidance reflecting [new concerns that the coronavirus is being spread by infected people who have no symptoms](#). Until now, the C.D.C., like the W.H.O., has advised that ordinary people don't need to wear masks unless they are sick and coughing. Part of the reason was to preserve medical-grade masks for health care workers who desperately need them at a time when they are in continuously short supply. Masks don't replace hand washing and social distancing.

- **What should I do if I feel sick?**

[If you've been exposed to the coronavirus or think you have](#), and have a fever or symptoms like a cough or difficulty breathing, call a doctor. They should give you advice on whether you should be tested, how to get tested, and how to seek medical treatment without potentially infecting or exposing others.

- **How do I get tested?**

If you're sick and you think you've been exposed to the new coronavirus, [the C.D.C. recommends that you call your healthcare provider and explain your symptoms and fears](#). They will decide if you need to be tested. Keep in mind that there's a chance — because of a lack of testing kits or because you're asymptomatic, for instance — you won't be able to get tested.

- **How can I help?**

[Charity Navigator](#), which evaluates charities using a numbers-based system, has a running list of nonprofits working in communities affected by the outbreak. You can give blood through the [American Red Cross](#), and [World Central Kitchen](#) has stepped in to distribute meals in major cities.

His organization, [Coney Island USA](#), is fortunate to own its landmark Spanish Colonial Revival building on Surf Avenue. The group was approved for a loan from the Small Business Administration, though Mr. Zigun noted that any performances are a long way off, as arts venues are in the last phase of New York State's [reopening plan](#).

If Mr. Zigun is able to reopen this year, the priorities would be the gift shop and the museum, where it's easier to maintain social distancing. Mr. Zigun said he's mining his "encyclopedic knowledge of carnival hucksterism" in considering how to modify the 45-minute sideshow.

Instead of six performers — from fire eaters to sword swallowers and snake charmers — for an audience of 100, Mr. Zigun is envisioning shorter, solo performances for smaller groups. "Maybe we go to a girl-to-gorilla-illusion, a stand-up, 10-minute experience that's so over-the-top it's going to be attractive and worth paying for," he said.

The coronavirus outbreak has hit at an inflection point for Coney Island, which over the past decade has seen a surge in development and ensuing gentrification since its [2009 rezoning](#), as well as the widespread destruction of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The neighborhood is also already struggling with high [storefront vacancy rates](#).



Memorial Day weekend will mark the 100th anniversary of the Wonder Wheel. Its three-day centennial celebration has been postponed. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

But the timing of the outbreak and its unpredictable trajectory could make the impact to the area all the more devastating. "When Sandy hit, we were closing the next day, so we had six months to clean up and rebuild," Mr. Vourderis said. "We also had the profits from the summer to put toward that cleanup and rebuilding process." The pandemic is affecting revenues and public

confidence, he continued. And "Coney Island is a very public place."

Earlier this month, [The City](#) reported that Mark Treyger, the city councilman who represents Coney Island, Representative Hakeem Jeffries of New York, and State Senator Diane Savino called for loans to be turned into grants in order to mitigate the impact the virus will have on seasonal businesses. "We cannot and will not allow the clock to turn back on Coney Island," Mr. Treyger wrote in a letter.

Mr. Vourderis is trying to stay positive. "Coney Island has the advantage of fresh air, sunshine, and the beach," he said. "When I stand out on the boardwalk and I'm looking out at the ocean, it just has such a calming and reassuring effect that everything will be OK."