

LA, San Francisco lead California business reopening pace

May 4 2021, by Brian Melley and Janie Har



Dressed in a Star Wars theme to celebrate Star Wars Day, bartender Karissa Marston jokingly strikes a pose while making a cocktail for a customer at Scum and Villainy Cantina, a geek bar located on Hollywood Blvd, in Los Angeles, Tuesday, May 4, 2021. California has the lowest infection rate in the country. Los Angeles County, which is home to a quarter of the state's nearly 40 million people and has endured a disproportionate number of the state's 60,000 deaths, didn't record a single COVID-19 death Sunday or Monday, which was likely due to incomplete weekend reporting but still noteworthy. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

San Francisco has largely beaten the coronavirus pandemic by avoiding it, while Los Angeles was nearly beaten by it during a deadly winter surge.

But both emerged simultaneously Tuesday as the first urban areas in California to reach the least-restrictive tier for businesses to reopen.

California's signature cities met infection and vaccine thresholds to allow indoor bars to welcome people again, larger crowds to cheer on Major League Baseball's Dodgers and Giants, and expanded capacity at restaurants, movie theaters, amusement parks, gyms and other establishments.

It's a remarkable turnaround for LA considering it was ground zero for infections and deaths when California was the nation's epicenter of the virus outbreak just a few months ago.

"It was horrible," John Pryor said Sunday after one of his few outings at the recently reopened Angeleno Wine Co. near downtown LA. "It's crazy that we were in the worst place in the country and now all of a sudden we're the best."

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Fans celebrate Star Wars Day at Scum and Villainy Cantina, a geek bar located on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, Tuesday, May 4, 2021. California has the lowest coronavirus infection rate in the country. Los Angeles County, which is home to a quarter of the state's nearly 40 million people and has endured a disproportionate number of the state's 60,000 deaths, didn't record a single COVID-19 death Sunday or Monday, which was likely due to incomplete weekend reporting but still noteworthy. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

A total of seven of the state's 58 counties are now in the so-called yellow tier, which is the final stage of a phased reopening plan before a projected return to business as usual June 15. The five other counties are all remote areas of Northern California.

On a map showing the status of each county, LA and San Francisco are

yellow islands in a sea of orange, the second-least restrictive tier. There are 39 counties in the orange tier, home to 60% of residents. A dozen counties, mostly in the agricultural Central Valley, are in the second-strictest tier and none remain in the strictest category.

San Diego and the state's other most populated counties, which fared better than LA through much of the pandemic, remain at least two weeks from a broader reopening.

However, the Navy announced Tuesday that it was ending some strict COVID-19 rules for tens of thousands of San Diego-based sailors.

For the first time since last year, sailors will be allowed to visit public beaches, dine at reopened restaurants and patronize local bars, while restrictions for some on-base facilities will be relaxed, the San Diego Union-Tribune reported.



In this Jan. 27, 2021, file photo, motorists line up for COVID-19 vaccinations and testing in the parking lot of Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles. Los Angeles County, which is home to a quarter of the state's 40 million people and has endured a disproportionate number of deaths, didn't record a single COVID-19 death on Sunday, May 2. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

The move comes as signs of life are returning to California streets that emptied, shops and restaurants that closed and office buildings that went dark after a statewide shutdown in March 2020.

Freeways are becoming congested, workers are returning to offices, and people are getting together for drinks and dinner, much of it still al fresco style.

On Sunday in downtown LA's vibrant Arts District, where colorful murals cover former industrial buildings, drivers circled the block looking for parking spaces. Diners filled the sidewalk tables of Wurstküche, eating sausages and drinking Belgian and German beer.

Standing in a line of people waiting for a table at Angel City Brewery that extended down the street, Chris Sammons said he felt a civic obligation to support businesses.

"It feels like almost a duty to be engaged with the city," Sammons said. "We have to bring LA back to life."



In this July 26, 2020, file photo, with the seats in Dodger Stadium empty, Los Angeles Dodgers starting pitcher Julio Urias throws the ball to a San Francisco Giants batter during the third inning of a baseball game in Los Angeles. Los

Angeles and San Francisco are poised Tuesday, May 4, to be the only major urban areas in the state to meet guidelines to move into the least-restrictive tier. It's a remarkable turnaround considering California was the epicenter of the virus outbreak in the U.S. just a few months earlier. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

It was the first outing for his friend, Stephen Tyler, who had hunkered down for so long and had recently been vaccinated.

"It's just good to be out in the city again, be around people," Tyler said. "Even this, I don't care about standing in line. It's all kind of new again."

In San Francisco, business has picked up at Mixt, a popular lunch spot for salad lovers in the Financial District. But it's not at pre-pandemic levels when lines spilled outdoors, said Leslie Silverglide, co-founder and CEO of the the chain. She plans to open two more stores downtown in coming weeks.

"It seems as if people are coming back," she said. "They're excited to be having lunch with colleagues again."

Fear of catching the virus prompted a huge drop in mass transit ridership. But Jason Alderman said he felt like a kid on his first day of school when he took a commuter train into San Francisco when his company reopened its headquarters in late March.



In this April 10, 2020, file photo, Rev. Nicolas Sanchez takes a phone call from a parishioner after live-streaming the Good Friday Mass without parishioners due to COVID-19 at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Los Angeles. Now, in early May 2021, California has the lowest case rate in the country. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File)

"Instead of feeling like a hollowed-out ghost town that people had quickly abandoned, it felt like there were green shoots of life," he said. "I felt a twinge of the energy that used to be there."

When the lockdown order came, an estimated 137,500 workers for San Francisco companies that include Google, Facebook and Uber, seemingly vanished overnight.

Moving vans carted off households for roomier suburban homes and younger people simply packed up their cars and left since they could work from anywhere. Residential rents plummeted, but now are climbing.

The office vacancy rate in San Francisco is 18% compared with 10% a year earlier, said John Chang, senior vice president at Marcus & Millichap, a commercial real estate financing and advisory company. In Los Angeles, vacancies are at 17.5%, up from 13.5% a year earlier.

More telling, perhaps, is that only 14% of key cards are being used to enter offices in San Francisco, compared with 24% in LA. At the other end of the spectrum is Dallas, where data showed 41% of cards being used, reflecting the different approaches to the virus in the two states.



In this March 28, 2020, file photo, a sign is posted at the closed entrance to Innsdale Trail near the Hollywood sign in Los Angeles, amid the coronavirus pandemic. Now, in early May 2021, California has the lowest case rate in the country. (AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill, File)

Chang said workers suddenly abandoned San Francisco when the original shutdown order took effect. He expects the return will be more gradual.

At its worst point, more than 500 people a day were dying in California and hospitals in the LA area could barely treat the overwhelming influx of patients.

Overall, Los Angeles has had 11,633 cases and 233 deaths from COVID-19 per 100,000 people while San Francisco has had 4,095 cases and 61 deaths.

San Francisco reached the least-restrictive tier for a brief period in October, the only urban area to do so, before an alarming surge in cases forced a retreat. LA never emerged from the most restrictive tier until March.

Under the new rules that take effect Thursday, many establishments, such as the Angeleno Wine Co. tasting room, can double capacity to 50%.



In this May 18, 2020, file photo, the TCL Chinese Theatre is shown with no people present in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles. Los Angeles County is expected to move Tuesday, May 4, 2021, into the least-restrictive yellow tier, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (AP Photo/Ashley Landis, File)

The small wine bar reopened to the public last weekend after being closed all but two weeks over the past 13 months.

Co-owner Amy Luftig Viste said she became emotional seeing old friends reunited for the first time in a year as animated conversation flowed from the tables set among barrels of aging wine and echoed off the brick walls.

"It felt like the winery had come alive again," Luftig Viste said. "It's just

such an honor to be the place that people come to break the seal as we start to come out again."

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