

Insider Insights

A Higher Calling in the Hospitality Sector

By [Steve Adams](#) | Banker & Tradesman Staff | May 24, 2020



Photo by Chris Smith

Dan Donahue
President, Saunders Hotel Group
Age: 55
Industry experience: 30 years

After a stint in the seminary and tour of duty tending bar, Dan Donahue found a new calling in the hotel business. The immediate past chair of the Massachusetts Lodging Association board of directors, Donahue is a former manager of The Lenox Hotel in Boston and was promoted to president of Saunders Hotel Group in 2017. The company is partnering with Boston developer Noannet Group and Cain International on the Back Bay's most dramatic new hotel landmark of the coming decade: the \$400 million Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences at 40 Trinity Place.

Q: How many Saunders properties have remained open during the COVID-19 crisis?

A: The Comfort Inn in Revere caters to the airlines and essential workers in and around the airport. At the Lenox, we decided not to close early on. I don't think it was even in discussion. We are maintaining our management team. We're family-owned and we decided we have two

pillars. Our first pillar is the location, and the next is our people. It's vitally important that we keep our people, so they are all working distantly from home. I have a handful of managers running the day-to-day operations for the one to eight rooms we have open tonight. It was four last night, so I'm doing my job and doubled our occupancy.

Q: What have been the biggest changes in operations?

A: Right now, because we have such a limited number of rooms, we're very targeted in cleaning. When we see a guest using the elevator, it's almost instantaneous. When we start to imagine what it would be like to have an almost full hotel, it's going to be a lot more cumbersome than it is right now. Every hour, we're sanitizing public spaces. The good news about our hotels is when we invite guests back in, there hasn't been anybody in their room for six or eight weeks. So it's a very sterile controlled environment right now.

In the hospitality community, whether you're a hotel or a restaurant or a mom-and-pop store, it's an environment that people feel comfortable in. Whatever the state or city requires doesn't amount to anything if people don't feel comfortable in your space. If I'm a tenant or a guest, what's your expectation? That you can self-park. Valet's probably not going to happen right away. You can approach the hotel without too much interaction. You can take your bags up if you like. Cleaning and sanitizing has been a new frontier for all of us.

Q: How is the hotel community responding as a group to the travel downturn?

A: What's amazing to me is Boston is the first city I've worked with where there's not a lot of movement among general managers. They tend to stay in place. I'm best of friends with most of the GM's. We have a community that is helpful to each other. It's unique in Boston. Boston thinks it's a big city, but it's very manageable and intimate and everybody gets along. When this crisis first started, a lot of us got together and said, "What are you thinking?" The good thing is we're all in the same boat, with the exception of a few key businesses that are thriving. There's no hospitality company saying this is great. There are no islands in hospitality. I compete with a lot of my friends, but we're all supporting each other, and it really is a community which is the way it was coming out of the 2008-2009 downturn. What scares me is everybody is looking for the government to help, but as hospitality managers we have to create our own success.

Q: With the Boston Marathon postponed until September, how important is that event for the Back Bay hotel market?

A: The marathon is kind of like our Black Friday. It's our introduction of going from the red in the winter into a season of profitability. Business travelers start to travel, tourism and graduations come back. The marathon is the line of demarcation for us saying we're back in the saddle again. We're a stone's throw from the finish line, and not to have the marathon was a huge hit for our hotel and Back Bay and Boston. If we can pull this off in September, we'll be doing great. We never look at the glass as half-empty.

Q: What about the potential Hynes Convention Center redevelopment and the changes it might mean for Back Bay hospitality?

A: It's huge for the city. The Hynes is a unique property. You're in the middle of Back Bay, which is the heart and soul of Boston. The Back Bay Association is making sure we're protected and making sure the Hynes can be a place that reinvents itself and prospers.

Q: What led you into the hotel business initially?

A: My first job was actually as a bartender, and I met my wife at T.G.I. Friday's in Princeton, New Jersey. She worked at the Marriott Residence Inn in Princeton in sales. I thought, "I'll get into hotels, it's more 9-to-5," and I went into operations and ended up working more hours than I ever did in restaurants. Hotels never close.

Donahue's Five Favorite Local Places to Be Outside His Hotels

1. WequassettResort and Golf Club, Cape Cod
2. Al Dente Restaurant, North End
3. TheColonnade Hotel rooftop pool and bar, Boston
4. Grill 23, Boston
5. Rochambeau Upstairs Bar, Boston