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## This one's on the house

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SOMERS POINT — The Anchorage is still loud.

But as owner Don Mahoney takes a break to talk Thursday, the noise doesn't come from a busy dinner crowd or a late-night cocktail of music, laughter and voices. It's from a squadron of workers ripping down the ceiling above the bar, the mission of the moment in the effort to bring back the landmark tavern from the four-alarm fire that ripped through its upper floors early Monday morning.

With 80 or so hours to think about it, Mahoney now calls that "the most depressing day of my life." But he makes it clear that he's much more interested in talking about the future than he is in wallowing in the destruction left behind by a fire that started in a bathroom fixture and spread its pain through much of his historic anchor of Bay Avenue, one of Atlantic County's oldest operating businesses.

The immediate future, he knows, is lots of hard work by his chosen contractors to get rid of all the evidence of the fire — tearing out everything it actually burned, plus repairing the severe smoke and water damage it left behind. Next comes all the rebuilding to reach his goal of making the Anchorage look exactly like it did when he left work Sunday night.

And then, in two to three months, he hopes, comes the grand reopening of the legendary Anchorage Tavern — starting with two nights of private parties to thank all the firefighters and police and everybody else who helped try to save a building that's been in business for more than 130 years, and "everyone who helped put it back together."

That party will take two nights, Mahoney says, because "so many people were involved, you couldn't get them all in on just one night. And it doesn't matter if it's (ready to open on) a Friday and Saturday. I don't care."

He wants to do that because he is so thankful for what the volunteer firefighters did, and when they did it — the fire alarm went off about 5 a.m. — and how well they did it, managing to keep the damage to where he can reasonably hope to reopen sometime before Christmas, if not before Thanksgiving.

Another big concern for Mahoney is his 75 or so workers — about 80 percent of them, he figures, people he first met when he got his start at the Anchorage in 1996, leasing the kitchen operation from its former owner. Mahoney then bought the whole building and business in 2000, and he's been working seven days of almost every week there since then.

He says he's telling all his people they should apply for unemployment compensation, which he knows won't pay them what they're used to making at this time of year. But he's been promising them that the Anchorage will make up the difference between what they take home from unemployment and what they would normally make in the fall.

"That's the right way to do it," Mahoney says. "It's the only way to go. This is our family, and

nobody should have to get hurt here.”

Of course, Mahoney gets hurt in that setup, because those paychecks will come out of his pocket — which has no money going into it with his business closed by the fire.

“So that,” he explains, “is why we want to go as fast as we can fixing it up.”

Plus some local bars and restaurants have offered to hire his people and keep them working while the Anchorage is closed, if they’d rather stay busy. But to get his business back in business, Mahoney has hired All Risk Insurance Restoration Experts, a Camden County-based company that brought back the famed Lobster House in Lower Township after it suffered major damage in a fire last September. The Lobster House reopened in April.

Mahoney is still getting to the Anchorage at his normal time — around 5 in the morning — to get ready for the work crews to get there. But life has been far from normal at his dream bar — starting with having to throw out all the food that was in the place when the fire hit.

Worse than that, every bottle that was behind the bar had to get poured down the drain, say Don Mahoney and his brother/manager, Jim, with officials from the county Health Department watching. Plus, Jim adds, more than 100 cases of beer that were stored in the basement also had to get destroyed, with those same official witnesses making sure none of it disappeared along the way.

Still, in spite of such disruptions and disappointments, the Mahoneys hope and expect that things are on their way back to their everyday rhythms — with them spending just about every day in the Anchorage, with their staff pouring booze into glasses, not into the sewer system, and with the noise coming from a big crowd having a good time, not from a small crew trying to turn a fire into just a bad memory, and not a constant, charred reminder of their worst day ever.

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