The COVID-19 and subsequent closure of restaurants and food establishments, except for takeout and delivery, have created challenges for our food service businesses and have significantly changed the character and activity level in the commercial areas of communities. As of June 5, 2020, Montgomery County restaurants and food establishments have been permitted to expand their services to outdoor dining, subject to state and local restrictions aimed at continuing to protect the public’s health and safety. Even with the county in the green phase as of June 26, 2020, allowing indoor dining at 50 percent in some cases, outdoor dining may still be critical to a restaurant’s survival.

Many businesses, especially in Montgomery County’s boroughs and villages, may have less outdoor space available to use for dining due to smaller lots and narrower sidewalks. In order to address these constraints and provide more flexible opportunities for outdoor dining, municipalities may consider temporarily converting on-street parking spaces in strategic locations to expand outdoor dining opportunities. This can help create wider pedestrian walkways while also allowing for the creation of additional outdoor dining spaces that are convenient for restaurants. Some municipalities have also allowed for the temporary closure of local streets, usually targeted over a weekend period, to accommodate dining.

Restaurants with existing sidewalk seating were able to use it immediately during the yellow phase.

Key Takeaways

- Outdoor dining allows restaurants to expand their capacity to serve food and beverages to customers under the state’s yellow and green phases of the COVID-19 pandemic response.
- Many communities already permit outdoor dining or sidewalk cafés; however, current zoning and other restrictions may significantly limit the amount of space each establishment can utilize as outdoor dining.
- Temporarily allowing other areas, such as on-street parking spaces, to be converted into outdoor dining for local restaurants helps to reactivate our community’s Main Streets and commercial centers. Some municipalities have allowed for temporary street closures to accommodate outdoor dining.
By creating opportunities for restaurants and food establishments to expand economic activity to outdoor spaces, such as on-street parking spaces, communities can help increase the capacity of restaurants and food establishments as they slowly reopen under the state’s guidance.

“Council has granted authority to the manager and police chief to conduct spot closures of local streets for a limited duration to allow local restaurants to make use of the space for outdoor dining and food sales. The borough feels that the ability to flexibly adapt to changing conditions is critical.”

— Mary Aversa, Manager, Ambler Borough

RESOURCES

The Recovery Will Happen In Public Space
This article from Project for Public Spaces describes a wide variety of ways that activities can be shifted to outdoor public spaces such as streets, sidewalks, and plazas and includes examples from around the world.

Pennsylvania’s “Guidance for Businesses in the Restaurant Industry Permitted to Operate During the COVID-19 Disaster Emergency to Ensure the Safety and Health of Employees and the Public”
This guidance document addresses the procedures businesses in the restaurant industry must follow to limit the spread of COVID-19 to the extent they are permitted to conduct in-person operations.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s “Considerations for Restaurants and Bars”
Guidance from the CDC for ways in which restaurants and bars can protect employees, customers, and communities and slow the spread of COVID-19 as they resume operations.

Streets for Pandemic Response & Recovery
This guidance tool from NACTO synthesizes common methods communities are using to adapt streets to support businesses and allow for more flexibility.

RELATED TOPICS

• Adaptive Streets
• Open Space Reimagined
• Municipal Strategies

Alternatively, this conceptual illustration shows how outdoor dining capacity could be increased by expanding dining into a closed section of roadway while maintaining a 6-foot-wide clear sidewalk path for pedestrians on either side.

For more detailed requirements, visit https://www.governor.pa.gov/covid-19/restaurant-industry-guidance/

When designing your outdoor dining space, it is important to remember:

When using a sidewalk or a parking space along a curb, pedestrians must be able to pass safely outside the 6-foot zone around all seated customers.