HOW CAN BUSINESSES ADAPT TO THE RULES ON SOCIAL DISTANCING?

Municipalities around Montgomery County have embraced a variety of short-term strategies to react to the changes the business environment has undergone due to the pandemic. As this situation continues to change, municipal governments may want to consider what long-term changes would be advantageous or necessary to make as well.

As a short-term strategy, municipalities can consider converting parking spaces to food pickup zones. Lansdale Borough has designated four pick-up zones for such a purpose. It has worked well, and the borough is considering permanently allowing these zones to make future pickup of takeout easier in its downtown.

When Ambler Borough approached local restaurants to see if closing Butler Avenue at selected times would help them, the restaurateurs expressed they would prefer to keep the avenue open to avoid obstruction of their thriving curbside takeout.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• Under the green phase of reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are still significant state limitations on capacity for dining and other retail establishments.
• Curbside pickup can be a short-term strategy to help local businesses with sales while social distancing limits the number of patrons allowed in a shop at one time.
• Walk-up windows can be a long-term strategy to supplement traditional ways of doing business, helping to promote economic development and enabling social distancing at the same time.

Designated pickup zones could also be used by retail establishments. Department, hardware, and many other retail stores are increasingly arranging for customers to make curbside pickups of merchandise purchased online. This is happening in King of Prussia at the mall.
Use of walk-up windows is a long-term strategy that restaurants, food services, and other businesses can implement to adapt to the changing business environment. Customers may feel safer picking up food, beverages, or merchandise without entering a business. Shops can keep their employees safer and still easily serve their customers with the addition of a walk-up takeout window. Businesses that already had this type of window in place have experienced its great benefits during the pandemic.

These windows reduce the inconvenience of entering and exiting the building for curbside pickup and can especially be helpful for small establishments that may not have as much room inside for social distancing. Although walk-up windows are typically used for takeout food service, many retail shops may find them helpful during this time.

Thinking more broadly, municipalities in Montgomery County have helped their local businesses by taking a more flexible approach to regulation, either by adopting a formal ordinance, by suspending enforcement of certain ordinances, or by granting more discretion to staff. These measures allow local businesses to take advantage of tools such as walk-up windows, curbside pickup, and outdoor dining on space where it would not typically be allowed. These flexible measures allow restaurants and other businesses to make pragmatic modifications to their business operations in order to have a better chance of surviving and, sometime soon, thriving.

RESOURCES:

“How Retailers Are Adapting to Curbside Pickup.”
Article focusing on businesses adapting through curbside pickup, retail best practices, and future predictions

Curbside Pickup at Retail Stores Surges 208 Percent
Article highlighting the dramatic growth in online retail orders and curbside pickup during the pandemic, noting that some think this practice is here to stay

Is Curbside Pickup a Long-Term Strategy or Short-Term Fix?
Recently adopted Upper Moreland Township ordinance providing an example of how municipalities have liberalized regulations to accommodate businesses

RELATED TOPICS

• Outdoor Dining
• Adaptive Streets

“The borough has… adopted a resolution temporarily relaxing zoning requirements pertaining to outdoor dining, pickup windows, pop-up tents, etc. that has allowed our businesses to flourish within the strict COVID-19 restrictions. Hatboro’s own Silvio’s Deli has taken full advantage of these relaxed zoning regulations through utilizing a pickup window for customers, which limits contact with staff and allows for additional social distancing measures while waiting for food.”

— Diane Heggelé, Hatboro Borough Manager

Walk-up windows should provide adequate space for the patron as well as the pedestrian passing by.

Consider aesthetics of the sill and trim to help the window blend into the façade
A clear area 6’ x 6’ should be provided for the patron but should not obstruct the path for pedestrians

Walk-up windows or nearby entryways for staff should be designed to serve the disabled