PARKING LOTS PROVIDE A GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR MORE OUTDOOR DINING

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent closure of restaurants and food establishments, except for takeout and delivery, has created challenges for our food service businesses and has significantly changed the character and activity level in our communities’ commercial areas. As of June 5, 2020, Montgomery County restaurants and food establishments have been permitted to expand their services to outdoor dining for patrons, 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.

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 plazas and surface parking lots, to be converted into outdoor dining for local restaurants helps to reactivate our community’s Main Streets and commercial centers.
By creating opportunities for restaurants and food establishments to expand economic activity to outdoor spaces, such as public and private parking lots, communities can help increase the capacity of restaurants and food establishments as they slowly reopen under the state’s guidance.

Conceptual illustration showing how 15 parking spaces in a downtown public parking lot, as well as a portion of an adjacent public plaza, could be converted to outdoor dining.

Conceptual illustration showing how one row of parking spaces and a drive aisle in a shopping center could be converted to outdoor dining to serve multiple food establishments.

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

- Arrange the tables and seating in your space so that all seated customers are at least 6 feet from any other seated customers.
- When using a parking lot for outdoor dining, make sure that both the drive aisles and pedestrian access are clearly marked.
- When creating outdoor dining areas, consider the following:
  - 6' CLEAR BETWEEN CHAIRS
  - BARRIERS FROM TRAFFIC

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

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

“We are happy to assist our restaurants in reopening for outdoor dining during the current pandemic phase. Restaurants that want to use portions of their parking lots can do so without a permit as long as adequate parking remains available and emergency access is protected. If they want to have a tent to provide a more comfortable dining experience, we require a permit for safety reasons, to ensure proper anchoring, safe ingress and egress, and fire precautions.”

—Charles Guttenplan, AICP
Whitemarsh Township Director of Planning and Zoning