

# Outdoor Dining and the COVID Pandemic

## Context

Due to the pandemic and safety restrictions that reduce business and restaurant capacity, many communities have been looking to the outdoors as an option to expand and make up for lost indoor seating space ([How the Pandemic is Bringing Dining to Streets, Sidewalks, and Parking Lots in the United States](#)).

Restaurants have been hit particularly hard in this respect and are some of the biggest new users of outdoor space in the right-of-way. A survey of more than 5,000 restaurant owners and operators conducted by the National Restaurant Association found:

- Nationwide, sales were down 47% during the period from March 1 to March 22
- 54% of restaurant operators have switched to off-premises service only
- Seven in 10 operators have had to lay off employees and reduce the number of hours worked
- Roughly half of them anticipate more layoffs and hourly reductions over the next 30 days
- More than six in 10 said they have had to reduce their operating hours
- Based on the survey results, the National Restaurant Association estimates that during the first 22 days of March, the restaurant industry lost an estimated \$25 billion in sales and more than 3 million jobs.
- *Note, this was early in the pandemic (March):* <https://restaurant.org/articles/news/study-details-impact-of-coronavirus-on-restaurants>

*“Now, six months after the first shutdown, one in six restaurants — or a total of 100,000 establishments nationwide — have “closed either permanently or long-term,” according to a new survey the [National Restaurant Association] released on Sept. 14.*

*Additionally, the findings show that nearly three million restaurant employees are unable to work, and that nationwide, the industry lost \$165 billion from March through July and will have lost \$240 billion in sales by the end of 2020.”*

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/food-drink/coronavirus-pandemic-restaurant-shutdowns>

Many communities know that expanding space for outdoor service has benefitted businesses as it has allowed for a revival of onsite food service that meets guidelines for six feet of social distance between patrons; this has likely been a key factor in enabling many of them to keep their doors open during these difficult times. While we all want our businesses to succeed we also acknowledge that with new things oftentimes there also comes a learning curve.

To help towns consider some questions that the Regional Planning Commission has raised regarding safe operations of outdoor dining, particularly with the winter months almost upon us, CRCOG has compiled a few resources that may be helpful in considering the evolution of outdoor dining for this upcoming winter season or even potential for permanent programs. ***Use and adapt them as best suits your community!***

*As we enter into our first winter/flu season amid the COVID pandemic, we encourage all towns to stay safe and consult with your local health department or CDC with any questions.*



[Reimagining Outdoor Space: Restaurants and Retail, Guidelines for Expanded and New Outdoor Seating, Washington DC](#)



A robust guide with detailed illustrations and design requirements, i.e. buffers between pedestrian path and dining tables, requirements for taped delineations on sidewalks, use of water-filled barriers, etc.

[Montgomery County Planning Commission \(MCPC\), Pennsylvania](#)



Have compiled some resources and created “planning papers” for outdoor dining, one for [streets and sidewalks](#) and one for [parking lots](#).

[Winter Places, Winter Placemaking](#)



A compilation of ideas for winter activation ideas sourced from a design competition that goes beyond the outdoor dining ideas. Some may be more practical than others, but worth sharing to encourage folks to think creatively about enjoying the outdoors during the winter months.

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