USE OF TENTS TO SUPPLEMENT DINING SPACE
IN RETAIL FOOD SERVICE ESTABLISHMENTS: A REVIEW

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With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 came many voluntary and involuntary restrictions on movement of people in social settings. For purposes of this white paper the focus will be on the impact these restrictions have had on the retail food service industry in Pitkin County. Among the most controlling decisions that had to be made by medical and public health experts, and ultimately by elected officials was the closure of all food and bar service establishments. As more data was gathered and more success was realized that virus suppression strategies were working to reduce the proliferation of the disease, previously restrictive control strategies were able to be lessened. Included in the softening of restrictions was allowing indoor dining.

In order to have a measurable response to slowly opening sit-down indoor and outdoor dining the number of patrons was limited to a specific number. The criteria determining the number of patrons included social distancing of keeping individuals at least 6 feet apart unless seated during the actual consumption of food. This also included making a hard decision to identify the bar area of an establishment as either a bar with no patron seating, or a dining area with no direct bar service. The differentiation between indoor and outdoor dining was made based on the understanding that outdoor activities offer more protection from contagious viral spread than offered by an indoor venue.

As the pandemic progressed into the summer, the impact of complete closure of restaurants and bars resulted in severe economic damage to establishment owners, staff, equipment and food suppliers and others suffering collateral consequences. As data began to show success in viral control as mentioned earlier, creative means began to surface to maximize restaurant opening yet remain compliant with the State of Colorado and Pitkin County Public Health Orders. Since, as of this writing, indoor dining seating is limited to 50% of the square footage of the business or 50 people (excluding staff) per room whichever is less, the discussion began about best ways to expand seating area and yet remain socially distant from other diners.

Recent ideas to expand seating have included erecting tents next to or attached to existing licensed restaurants. On the surface, this is an innovative idea with promise. It became clear that more research was needed to identify “fatal flaws” and/or boundaries that might present difficulties, problems or prohibitions of this use of tents before business owners committed scarce funds to this approach.

The Public Health interest in supporting outdoor dining this summer has been based on advantages of an outdoor setting over an indoor setting. Sunlight provides ultraviolet light that reduces the viability of viruses. This is helpful in reducing the threat from droplet of viral matter that may be on surfaces.

In addition, dining outdoors provides an ongoing supply of fresh air to dilute and diffuse tiny particles of airborne viral matter where people congregate. This is particularly important as diners talk without wearing masks. A critical mass of viral material can form an invisible cloud in the absence of proper ventilation. A person breathing in that space for an extended period of time may be at risk.
Unfortunately, an enclosed tent blocks both types of benefits of outdoor dining and may add other risks. A typical “party tent” converted to outdoor dining space will block sunlight and the side enclosures will block air flow. Given that these types of structures are not designed for the type of use proposed, thus far we have not found good information about air exchange nor equipment intended to provide the benefit of mechanical ventilation. Additional research into practices of the marijuana industry is ongoing since they employ grow tents with advanced ventilation. Thus far, no practical examples have been found.

Heated tents typically use a heater and a fan to push air to better distribute heat, resulting in air rising toward the top of the tent and then moving around in a circular pattern. That pattern could be a concern for airborne transmission, however there is not enough information so far to state that as a fact.

Research conducted by Bob Schultz and Tom Dunlop resulted in categorizing the discussion into issues such as compliance with: 1) Colorado Retail Food Establishment Rules and Regulations, 2) Fire safety codes, 3) building codes, 4) zoning codes and 5) land use codes. In order to offer a beginning discussion of these topics conversations were held with knowledgeable people. Detailed information was gathered regarding compliance with the Colorado food code. More discussion is needed with experts in fire, building, zoning and land use.

Given what was gleaned to date and the lack of specific proposals, it was decided that questions about fire, building, zoning and land use would be deferred to those proponents.

**Food Service**

What follows is a summary of a conversation with Troy Huffman, Colorado Dept of Public Health and Environment and Natalie Tsevdos, City of Aspen Environmental Health Department.

The State Public Health Order uses the same guidance as does the Pitkin County Public Health Order regarding dining criteria, 50% of square footage, 50 people per room whichever is less. A “room” is defined as having 4 walls, ceiling and door(s). In reality, social distancing of keeping patrons 6 ft apart may be the determining factor. The dining area must be formatted to comply with social distancing with diners sitting in groups no larger than 8 per table.

Regarding the food code in particular, if a tent is erected near or attached to a licensed restaurant and food is served in the tent the State does not have to be involved. Diners can order off the menu and have staff take orders, serve and bus tables. Diners can place an order and go pick it up themselves and return to their table in the tent. After consuming the food, the diners leave and staff cleans the tables and disinfects the chairs and tables prior to the next seating.

A trigger that will engage the State inspection criteria (by the State if the establishment is in the Town of Snowmass Village, parts of Basalt and Pitkin Co. exclusive of the City of Aspen) or by the City of Aspen Environmental Health Department, is if ANY food is held, prepared or stored inside the tent. Examples are: an ice bin used to replenish drinks, food holding tables, a temporary bar, buffet service, etc. If any of these conditions exist or are proposed the State will require a plan review, licensing and inspection prior to allowed use.

It is important to realize, the Colorado food code does not prohibit a licensed restaurant from expanding dining into a tent, but compliance with the code is not negotiable.

Tent Safety

A discussion was held with one of the Roaring Fork Valley’s largest party rental companies to identify concerns they have experienced in years of tent rental. This is empirical information as it is from an informal conversation with Joe Parker, a person with 35 years of experience. Highlights of the visit are:

- Tents are primarily designed for summer or 3-season use. Tents have a thin layer of canvas/vinyl over an aluminum or similar frame. There is no practical way to insulate a tent for winter use.
- Heat inside the tent must run 24 hours a day or there will be freezing on the roof from humidity of people inside. Melting moisture will drip on people below.
- Large tent rental varies between $5,000-$7,000 a month. Propane or gas used to heat the space becomes a large expense. The cost to rent a tent for the winter is such that the person would be better off buying one.
- There is not an easy way to mechanically ventilate space inside a tent when sides are down. Fans are used to distribute heat, but not for air exchange or ventilation. Air is generally moved in a circular motion towards the top of the tent. (This is an important realization when understanding aerosol spread of COVID-19 can be moved easily by air currents)
- Snow load is a danger. In one venue where a tent was up for 30 days, someone had to remove the snow from the roof with a snow rake on a routine basis. There is no snow load rating for tents. (This last statement is based on the type of canvas tents the company interviewed rents)
- Propane and gas in an environment that is not carefully monitored can result in carbon monoxide buildup.
- The person interviewed said he is getting many calls for tents. He is concerned that people are going to create dangerous situations trying to make a tent do something it is not made for.

For purposes of this paper, it is important to keep in mind the comments made by the party rental company representative are not necessarily based on data gathering or scientific review, but rather on experience. This does not diminish the message that use of tents for long term food sales must weigh a number of variables in determining if it is a viable option for the upcoming winter season.

Using tents or similar structures to enhance dining space in the interim during development of more long-term and sustainable responses to the spread of COVID-19, a vaccine for example, needs careful thought. Should this concept be considered as an option worth continued research a conversation involving the other various codes mentioned above should happen sooner than later.
Tent Use Check List

Research before you purchase or rent a tent for winter use

Food Safety
  o If any food is held, stored or prepared, then plan review, licensing and inspection is required

Tent Safety
  o There is no snow load rating for tents, roofs must be cleared regularly as they are typically not intended for winter use
  o Ventilation is uncertain so it is challenging to assess COVID risk, you may be asked to provide information on ventilation
  o Must be heated 24 hours per day
  o Propane is expensive, if gas source is available that may be less expensive
  o Carbon monoxide monitoring is necessary
  o For long term use, it is usually cost-effective to buy rather than rent

Fire Safety
  o Review the location and proposed use with the local fire authority

Building and Zoning
  o Review the location and proposed use with the local building and zoning departments

Land Use Code
  o Review the location and proposed use with the local Community Development Dept. for compliance with appropriate land use codes