



COVID-19 SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR OUTDOOR DINING TENTS

Montgomery County has allowed restaurants to re-open and with that comes a number of guidelines to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Restaurants specifically are trying to find innovative solutions to welcome diners under the new restrictions. Some of these restrictions include:

- ✓ Wearing masks unless eating or drinking
- ✓ Locating tables at least 6 ft apart
- ✓ Limiting the number of patrons at each table

To create additional areas for outdoor dining, many restaurants have set up outdoor seating and some are utilizing tents. Several fire and life safety issues need to be considered when using them, particularly with cold weather approaching. While this information focuses mostly on the use of tents by restaurants, most of these considerations are applicable to the use of tents for any occupancy type.

How Long Can a Tent Be Used?



During the Covid-19 emergency, tents will only be permitted when installed in a safe manner that does not restrict pedestrian access or create a safety impediment. While a formal permit will not be required, you must register with the Department of Permitting Services (see below) so that inspectors can ensure all safety concerns are met. Once the emergency is lifted, all permitting requirements will resume.

GETTING STARTED

Multiple safety precautions must be followed to erect a tent or membrane structure. For any restaurant planning to use a tent, start by following these three rules:

1. Register with Department of Permitting Services (DPS) at <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/DPS/Process/ld/outdoor-cafe-seating-permit.html>
2. Make sure to work with the DPS inspector to ensure the tent is erected and secured properly.
3. Review all applicable requirements in *NFPA 1*, *Fire Code*, and *NFPA 101*, *Life Safety Code* *

HOW THE CODES HELP ENSURE SAFETY

Requirements that address the use of tents and membrane structures are covered in:

- Section 11.11 of *NFPA 101*
- Chapter 25 of *NFPA 1*

These codes provide guidance for building and life safety issues that should be considered when using tents, some of which include:

- Egress, occupancy and a minimum of a 3 foot wide accessible pedestrian path must be maintained around the tent's perimeter
- Location and placement (will not be allowed at intersections where site distance is compromised)

EGRESS AND OCCUPANCY

The means of egress must comply with the requirements for the occupancy of the tent. Typically, restaurants are either an assembly or mercantile occupancy, depending on the occupant load. It is important to determine the **number of occupants in the space** to ensure that there are an appropriate number of exits providing adequate exit capacity and to ensure appropriate social distancing of 6 feet. Additional egress features to consider include:

- ✓ Are exits clearly marked?
- ✓ Is the tent required to have emergency lighting?
- ✓ Are all the exits accessible and clear of obstructions?

What type of occupancy does a restaurant fall under?

Restaurants with an occupant load of:



50 or more people are typically classified as assembly occupancies.



Fewer than 50 people are typically classified as mercantile occupancies.

Occupancy must include appropriate social distancing of 6 feet.



Covid-19 Safety Guidelines for Outdoor Dining Tents *CONTINUED*

For example, if a tent is erected in a parking lot, measures should be taken to prevent a vehicle from parking in front of an exit and blocking it. This could be mitigated with the use of barricades and signs and by properly educating staff members.

The maintenance of the means of egress for these tents will ensure that nothing (including the tent wires and supports) obstructs the exits, aisles, and other portions of the means of egress.

LOCATION AND PLACEMENT

Tent location must be approved by DPS. Special consideration should be given to ensure that the tent:

- ✓ Does not block fire department access
- ✓ Is not located too close to other buildings or lot lines
- ✓ Does not block the means of egress from other buildings
- ✓ Has at least a 10 ft distance around the tent that is free of combustible material
- ✓ Is a distance of at least 10 ft between stake lines of multiple tents to provide means of egress from the tents
- ✓ Has a minimum 3 foot wide accessible pedestrian path around the tent's perimeter

FABRIC FLAMMABILITY

One of the biggest concerns with a tent, as demonstrated during the 1944 Hartford Circus fire, is the flammability of the tent fabric. Because of this, both NFPA 1 and NFPA 101 require that the tent material meets the flame propagation performance requirements of NFPA 701, *Standard Methods of Fire Tests for Flame Propagation of Textiles and Films*. This test is performed on the fabric of the tent by a testing organization that will issue a certificate if the fabric has passed the test.

To verify the fabric of the tent meets the necessary requirements, DPS requires one of the following items for review: a certificate or other evidence of acceptance by an organization acceptable to DPS or a report of tests made by other inspection authorities or organizations acceptable to DPS.

Additionally, to limit the exposure to fire, several safety measures must be put in place:

- ✓ Smoking within the tent is not permitted, and “NO SMOKING” signs need to be posted.
- ✓ At least one side of the tent must be entirely open; screened in areas are considered indoor space.
- ✓ Tents may only be placed on non-combustible surfaces - dirt or concrete. They may not be placed on grass.
- ✓ **Only portable electric heaters** may be used **within** the tent, must be listed for that use, and must not create a tripping hazard. See attached information for allowed power source.
- ✓ Propane heaters may be used outside the tent but must be at least 5 feet away. Heated air may be piped into the tent.
- ✓ No cooking is allowed under or immediately adjacent to the tent.
- ✓ Fire extinguishers are required within the tent as directed by DPS.

Learn More

- ▶ Get free digital access to the codes by visiting:
 - [NFPA 1](https://nfpa.org/1) nfpa.org/1
 - [NFPA 101](https://nfpa.org/101) nfpa.org/101
 - [NFPA 701](https://nfpa.org/701) nfpa.org/701
- ▶ Read a recent NFPA [blog](#) for more on this topic.
- ▶ Visit nfpa.org/coronavirus for the most up-to-date information from NFPA regarding fire and life safety in the midst of COVID-19.

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