

Pandemic mandates put the hammer on Pennsylvania festivals, squeeze on local communities and non-profits

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For many Pennsylvanians, fall is a season of senses. The cool air on your face, the warmth of jeans and hoodies, the crisp crinkle of leaves beneath your feet. The timeless smells of tart apple cider, freshly baked pumpkin pies and salty-sweet kettle corn. Children's laughter bursts around us, and if you listen closely enough, you can hear echoes of small feet through straw fields and pumpkin patches. Fall is a time of tradition and community, and for much of Pennsylvania's cities and towns, it is one of homecoming. Your community's fall festival is perhaps the perfect marriage of all your seasonal sensory needs, and unfortunately, this fall, it's been canceled.

The coronavirus pandemic and subsequent statewide mandates have rendered it difficult, if not impossible, for most fairs, festivals and carnivals to take place in 2020. Perhaps there is some level of unification to be garnered by the fact that no matter your location in Pennsylvania, be it St. Mary's, Philadelphia, Washington or Lancaster, you are likely facing the distinct lack of traditional fall experiences. Pennsylvanians can ruminate in their fall frustration together. The tricky, and potentially far more devastating, part is the effect that festival cancellations will have on small businesses and non-profits and the people and places they support.

"This is a big deal for a lot of local non-profits," said Kellie Goodman Shaffer, a volunteer committee member from the Bedford Fall Foliage Festival. "For most of them, this is their largest fundraising opportunity for the year." The Bedford festival would have celebrated its 56th year in 2020, becoming not only a time-honored tradition but also an economic keystone to local citizens and businesses. "Local churches, Lions Club, marching band boosters, the local fire companies – everything from soup stands, to parking cars, to firehouse fries and steak sandwiches," said Goodman Shaffer. Attendance during the two-weekend event comes in at more than 70,000 – and Bedford county's standing population is just under 48,000. With those numbers, it doesn't take rocket science or pumpkin spice magic to see why local non-profits are quick to jump at the opportunity to fundraise during the festival. It is also not complicated to see the spiderweb effect festival cancellation will weave for Bedford and similar Pennsylvania communities.

"It was like a second Christmas season," said Elaine Housel, another member of the Bedford festival committee and retired business owner. "It was truly a way for us to showcase our town to people who would come in (to town) for the festival, and after experiencing it, they would want to return later in the year." Housel said she even knows people who retired to Bedford because their visit to the town for the festival was so endearing. Ultimately, however, the committee decided to cancel the 2020 event based on COVID-19-related restrictions for gatherings and both Housel and Goodman Shaffer noted that the group wanted to respect the state regulations.

There are still plans in Bedford of sidewalk sales, farm tours, socially distanced hayrides, farmers' markets and specials from local restaurants during the first two weekends in October when the festival would have occurred. The local chamber of commerce will be sharing a community calendar with hotel goers with hopes of reimaging some semblance of the atmosphere and attractions the festival would

have brought to the community. In some areas, however, the festival in question was canceled well before any preparations or plans were made.

Avery Eaton, office manager of The Mushroom Festival, held in Kennett Square every year the weekend after Labor Day, shared that the festival committee had decided to cancel in late March. "The mushroom industry donates thousands of pounds of mushrooms for the festival every year, and as a champion of that industry, we could not request such a donation," said Eaton. She explained that the pandemic-related lockdown had wounded the mushroom industry early in the year, with very little sign of significant recovery anytime soon. Eaton said any significant recovery for the mushroom industry will happen only as more restaurants begin to open, not only in Pennsylvania, but across the country. Unfortunately, The Mushroom Festival cancellation will not only take the potential to celebrate and snack on the celebrated fungus; it will also prevent the delivery of tens of thousands of dollars in grants to local charities.

The Mushroom Festival is a non-profit, grant-based organization that started in 1986 to promote and educate consumers about mushrooms, promote tourism in southern Chester County and offer financial support to the local community. With more than 80,000 people in attendance last year, it has been enormously successful. The organization has away more than \$1.2 million in grants since its start. Annual grant provisions vary based on the net proceeds of the festival; in recent years totaling up to \$114,000. Local charities apply for the grants and funds have gone to projects that include Girl Scouts sending cookies to local military deployed overseas; sponsoring children with HIV/AIDs to attend a summer camp; and adult literacy programs at the local library. This grant program, based solely on the profits of the festival, will not function in 2020. As a secondary fundraising option the festival has moved their Painted Mushroom Auction, a normal function at the festival, online this year, and will be giving the profits from the auction back to the community.

The New Cumberland Olde Towne Association, which facilitates the New Cumberland Apple Festival, is no stranger to the use of festival profits for the betterment of its south-central Pennsylvania town. Christine Leukus, who has assisted for 12 years and chaired the festival committee for the past six years, said the Association's purpose and profits are to serve the community. "The festival is used as a fundraiser for a way for us to give back to the Borough, but also to the various service organizations: the fire department, the police department and the fire police," said Leukus, "We also offer donations to local Boy Scout troops and a several of our local high school sports teams to help with set up, parking cars and getting cleaned up afterward." However, the Association recognized the need to make the difficult decision to cancel the festival based on state-mandated restrictions related to the pandemic.

In addition to the donations to the local government, service organizations, community and school programs, Leukus and the Olde Town Association also use proceeds to contribute to local revitalization and engagement efforts like restoring and revamping neighborhood sidewalks and walkways and purchasing a large screen and projector to provide free neighborhood movie nights at the borough park. This year they will use funds leftover from previous festivals to create banners for the town's street poles featuring local veterans and active duty military personnel through a program called "Hometown Heroes" for Veterans Day.

For the community of New Cumberland, the effect of the cancellation is like that of Kennett Square and Bedford. With a standing population of just more than 8,000 and a one-day festival that brings more than 12,000 to the town, it is hard to offer something similar to support local businesses. Still, Leukus

said that the public has been understanding and respectful following the mid-July announcement of the decision. "The public was saddened, but supportive," said Leukus. "They know that safety was our main focus when we decided to cancel this year. And we're planning to move forward next year." Efforts are underway for food truck events and holiday open houses, and Leukus and her fellow Olde Towne Association members are hopeful that these programs will provide a lift for local businesses and some cheer for local citizens, particularly in the face of the canceled festival.

Pennsylvanians have a decision to make this fall festival season. They can dwell on their fall frustration, screaming into their apple dumpling echo chambers, or they can find the hopefulness harnessed by the local committees and associations that have faced these tough decisions to cancel. Residents can actively assist local non-profits, charities and schools and government to supplement the substantial financial shortfall they are experiencing. Perhaps, it is such hopefulness that, when paired with craving for the feeling of community and homecoming that fall represents, will lead to action. If there is anything the coronavirus pandemic has taught, it is that Pennsylvanians are resilient and adaptable as individuals and as communities.

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