

No increased capacity for indoor dining due to spike in COVID-19 cases, Murphy says

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As temperatures fall and COVID-19 cases increase, Gov. Phil Murphy said now is not the time to increase capacity for indoor dining.

“My guess is no at this point,” Murphy said Monday on News 12 New Jersey’s “Ask the Governor” program. “I don’t say this with any amount of joy. The numbers have gone against us. I’m concerned that we sent mixed messages. These numbers are really sobering right now.”

The statement came hours after Murphy vetoed a bill that would help restaurants already limited on numbers of patrons. The announcement and veto were in stark contrast to Murphy’s statements a week earlier.

On Thursday, the governor hinted that a potential increase in capacity for indoor dining was possible.

“Cases are increasing, and we’re going to continue to see cases,” said Michael Chait, president of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber. “We’re going to have to learn to work, live and play in this environment.”

On Monday, Murphy vetoed a bill that would allocate \$30 million to the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, citing the \$100 million in Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act funding he allocated last week to support residents and businesses affected by the pandemic.

The bulk of the money, \$70 million, will be distributed to restaurants and other small businesses through the EDA’s Small Business Emergency Assistance Grant Program, including \$35 million reserved exclusively to support businesses classified as “Food Services and Drinking Places.”

While Chait said every little bit helps, he said it would be even more helpful if the Murphy administration set a goal of when restaurants can open at a larger capacity.

“If they were able to hear a plan for additional strategies or goals we need to be at for case count, then I think people would be more vigilant,” he said.

He added that New Jersey is one of only two states not at 50% capacity for indoor dining. The other is New Mexico.

There are more than 19,000 food and beverage establishments across the state, Chait said. Of the \$35 million allocated, that means each establishment would receive about \$3,684, if only half received funding.

“Those funds may help them get through a month, but they will need significantly more economic relief and some creative solutions as long as they remain restricted in capacity,” he said.

Ricky Alverio, owner of the Funky Cow in Hammonton, said it’s unfortunate for restaurants to be stuck at 25% capacity, but he believes Murphy is doing the right thing.

“Even though people are tired of staying home and want to go out, you’re risking yourself,” Alverio said.

At 25% capacity, his restaurant allows for 10 customers for indoor dining, but he has stuck to outdoor dining only as well as takeout. His outdoor area can seat 24 people. He also has bought heat lamps for when the weather gets colder.

In Ventnor, Red Room Café also is still not open for indoor dining, as 25% capacity will only allow 13 people inside.

Since the summer, a portion of Monmouth Avenue next to the restaurant has been closed so the restaurant can erect a tent or create space for outdoor dining.

Maria Gatta, Red Room’s owner, said the street will be closed indefinitely and she will continue to only offer outdoor dining and takeout.

“It’s going to be hard for all of us,” she said. “I’ll continue doing the outside dining, even if it’s around the side (of the restaurant).”

While she has hosted holiday parties in the past, she said this year it’s just not worth it. Instead, she’s offering home parties with a chef or catering options, including the seven fishes for Christmas Eve and upscale dishes for New Year’s Eve.

She’s even thinking of turning Monmouth Avenue into a winter wonderland, decorating the portion of the street and offering winter-inspired novelties, like hot chocolate.

“You have to get creative,” she said. “You just have to.”