

As the NCAFE chairperson, my heart breaks for the festival industry. Our festivals and special events promote community unity, keep us connected to our roots and hometown traditions, relieve us from the monotony of life, provide fun experiences and encourage us to live life full on. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 corona virus pandemic has forced us to cancel or postpone many events, practice social distancing and live in a world of unknown. In a twist of fate, the very time we need fun and togetherness, we can't gather due to mandates to eliminate crowds to prevent the spread of the corona virus.

Many festival planners are questioning what to do with their spring or early summer festivals. As the chairperson of the North Carolina Pickle Festival for the past 24 years, I also faced this hard decision. Our festival was scheduled for April 24-25, 2020. We had more social media posts than ever which led to telephone calls from Wisconsin, Maine, Massachusetts, Florida, Georgia, Ohio and other states. We were expecting our largest crowd ever. We had even partnered with a local bakery to make us pickle doughnuts. It was going to be DILLightful festival in so many ways.

However, on March 13, I met with Lynn Williams, my festival co-chairperson; our town manager, the president of Mt. Olive Pickle Company (presenting sponsor of our event) and our North Carolina Pickle Festival Board of Directors to decide the fate of our event. Immediately, we came to a consensus that the April 2020 festival could not occur, based on the belief that the health and well-being of the people of our community and all those who participate in the festival are what's truly important. Next, our conversation focused on whether we should reschedule. But, if we did, when? When would the corona virus pandemic end? Ultimately, we realized we had reservations about our ability to reschedule vendors, entertainers and special attractions on a Saturday in the busy fall season. We anticipated conflicts with many local events. Plus, we noted that the timing of a fall event would mean producing two festivals essentially in a six-month period -fall 2020 and April 2021. In the end, we felt cancelling was the right thing to do.

How can you decide what is the fate of your event? Can you afford to cancel? If you cancel, should you refund money to all? What do you do about the dated 2020 merchandise that you already ordered? So many questions and we had no answers. However, on the positive note, we realized that being six weeks out from our festival, we had an opportunity to halt the production of many things. That was the main reason we did not wait until April 1st to cancel our event (and at that point, we had no idea that a mandate would be set that crowds larger than 50 people could not gather). Fortunately, I was placing my final orders on festival T-shirts, banners, merchandise, etc. We realized that each day we waited to decide the festival's fate, the more money we would spend getting ready for the festival. Once the cancellation decision was made, a press release was sent out and the unraveling of the 2020 NC Pickle Festival began. I was sad for a few days, thinking that we would not have tens of thousands of people in Mount Olive eating DILLicious pickles, having a Dilly of a time and RELISHNG their experiences. But, by the time the press release came out a few days later, a sense of peace came over me and I could move on.

I have been pleasantly surprised at the conversations, emails and responses I have received from sponsors, vendors, entertainers and special event performers. Everyone is in the same uncharted waters. We opted to let all bands, entertainers and special events keep their deposits in exchange for a new contract to return to the 2021 NC Pickle Festival. We realized that many entertainers needed that money right now and paying us back would be difficult. However, we chose to return all money to

sponsors & vendors and entry fees for special events. We did not want to create a bookkeeping nightmare in 2021 with who received money back and who did not. Of course, finances were a huge concern for the NC Pickle Festival, not only having our seed money for the 2021 festival but also funds that are shared with the chamber of commerce and non-profits. We went into financial partnerships with our town and other businesses to ensure we have enough in our bank account to continue the tradition of the North Carolina Pickle Festival. Finally, we had ordered some merchandise that had already been received and we are selling that as limited items which will provide us some income and give the citizens of Mount Olive a chance to get some unique North Carolina Pickle Festival merchandise.

Overall, the North Carolina Pickle Festival will be fine, despite not having our 2020 event. However, each festival may have a different situation to contend with so here are some thoughts to ponder if you have to cancel or postpone your event.

- Will the mandate (50 people or less) still be in effect when your event occurs? If yes, you will have no choice but to cancel or postpone. Of course, this question is hard to answer at this point but I'm guessing any event in April or possibly May will not occur.
- Who needs to make the final decision about the fate of your event? Festival committee? Festival Board of Directors? Elected officials? County Officials? Health Department? Police Department? Fire Department? If you have your event, will you still get the town support you need?
- How much money have you already spent? Can you afford to return funds to all? How much more will you need to spend before you make your final decision? Should you return sponsorships or hold onto them for the postponed date or next year's date? Do your sponsors need that money back in light of small businesses having to shut due to mandates?
- What have you already ordered for your festival? What can you cancel? What costs can you cut? For example, we had ordered billboards but they had not been put on display yet. So, we just paid for the vinyls that were made and not the space to promote the event. We asked and received our billboard vinyls so we can use them for something else, if possible.

Never in my wildest dream did I think that the past 8 months of planning and organizing the 2020 North Carolina Pickle Festival would end like this. But it did and I am at peace with our decision. Little did we know on March 13th when we made the decision to cancel that just one week later, our lives would be turned upside down and we would have had to cancel it anyways. Just like a typical event planner, I'm already organizing the 2021 festival. I'm dreaming big, being creative, using my resources and most importantly, relying on my festival friends. My tagline is "Adventure On!" and I encourage each of you to stay strong and know that you and your festival will get through this. Make the decision that is best for your event and community. Know that you have the support of festival planners from around the state.

As I was deciding the fate about the 2020 NC Pickle Festival, I heard from so many state festival planners who were in the same decision-making process. It was comforting to talk, laugh, cry and have a virtual shoulder to lean on during that time. Together, we helped each other through these uncharted waters. Please know that NCAFE is here to help you and feel free to reach out to Stephanie Saintsing Naset at stephanie@ncfestivals.com, myself at julierbeck@gmail.com or other festival planners. We are here for you.

Julie Beck (World Famous)