



# The Barking Dog of Bethesda

## Has The Pandemic Taken a Bite Out of The Dog?

Establishments that depend on commercial-district employees as their patrons encounter unique obstacles in their attempt to return to normal.



WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

This is the fourth in a series of articles I've been writing on the Great Reopening of 2021. And while the previous installments covered the successful returns to form of Baltimore, Elicott City, and Ocean City, Md., this month's market – the office-heavy, Montgomery County city of Bethesda – has not fared as well in the ongoing pandemic.

John McManus, co-owner of The Barking Dog located in the heart of Bethesda's

commercial district, is one of those proprietors who has felt the sting. "There's no one down here!" he exclaimed, during a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*. "There are crickets. You could throw a grenade down the street and you wouldn't kill anybody. Now, there are some people who have returned to their offices. I'll give you a perfect example. My wife is in a brand-new office half a block from here. She just started going back three days a week. But her of-

fice is 60 percent empty. People are coming back, and they're going out. We did have a big Happy Hour last night [this interview was conducted in late September] with an office that brought 35 or 40 people. But that is, by far, the exception and not the rule. Things are NOT back to normal!"

The biggest loss of revenue for The Barking Dog has been substantially fewer corporate events and office parties. "It's where we make our money," McManus said.



"Selling beer and burgers is fine. But I need the parties to make the money."

He continued, "I just don't think people are comfortable yet, especially in Bethesda. Bethesda is highly vaccinated. Yet you see people wearing masks in their cars by themselves. I don't have a problem with personal safety, and we are starting to get some parties. But I literally just had a lady call me. She asked about windows being opened and mask mandates, and I said, 'Listen, it sounds like you need to stay home! I can't guarantee you anything.'"

Other nearby eating and drinking establishments have been going through similar upheaval. Among the once-popular businesses that have closed during the last 18-plus months are Boeymonger, Flanagan's Harp & Fiddle, George's Chophouse, Gusto Farm to Street, Jaleo, and Prima, among others.

"For us," McManus noted, "things are about 90 percent back to where they were. Yes, a lot of that is a function of the fact that many places have closed. And there's a lot of weird patterns going on here in Bethes-



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**~ John McManus**  
**Co-Owner, The Barking Dog**

da, and I can't figure them out." Indeed, Muscle Bar is closed two days a week. By most accounts, the Silver Diner is hurting for customers during the week, but quite busy on the weekends.

The Barking Dog has advantages, though, that some of these other places lack. "We are in a little different situation than others," McManus conceded, "because we're privately owned. My partner [Bob Brooksbank] and I have owned it for 21 years. We own the building. We own everything in it. We don't lease equipment. We don't have any bank debt. The only thing we have is an SBA loan, which is what saved us during the pandemic. Had we not gotten that loan, we probably would have been out of business."

McManus stated that the biggest test of his and Brooksbank's leadership has been managing finances. "But let me tell you," he added, with a big grin. "I was on the ball with the grants and the loans! The minute they announced them, I filed. The difference is, if you weren't legitimate, you weren't getting money. If you were paying people un-

der the table, you weren't getting money. If you weren't paying yourself, you weren't getting money. A lot of places that operated in the 'underground economy' where they don't pay people on a payroll, they weren't going to get Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) money and they sure weren't going to get a grant if they couldn't prove income. We're real. We have an accountant. We have a bookkeeper. What the government did saved a lot of small businesses in America. People can say what they want. PPP wasn't a perfect program. A lot of people abused it. But it saved my family business. It was instrumental. The government mucks a lot of things up. But, man, they did it right with that."

On the local level, he added, "The minute Montgomery County would announce a grant, I would apply. I got multiple grants from the county. They weren't a lot [of money], but they helped! Navigating the PPP was a bitch, but we got both our loans forgiven. Also, Montgomery County did us a solid when they allowed off-premise alcohol sales. That is something I really hope stays.





I was also very lucky to have an outdoor space with picnic tables that we added literally right before the pandemic. I obtained a permit for outdoor dining and seating, which I had for years. But until I got picnic tables, it was never a big thing for us. It worked out really well. It was the best thousand dollars I ever spent! The return on that has been awesome."

Speaking to other operators reading this who are struggling with the still lingering coronavirus, McManus stressed the need for personal dedication to the job and the business during such times of crisis. "I've been here 21 years," he said, "and the only reason I've survived is because I'm here every day! My partner and I have worked together a total of 31 years, and he and I are here

every single day."

But even he can see the day coming when he might step away: "I have my last kid in college. My wife works. I'm 57 years old, and I bought my first place when I was 25. I haven't been afraid to gamble, and I think I've managed my money well."

Nevertheless, McManus remains an optimist. "The glass is always half-full and not half-empty with me," he concluded. "I've also had a lot of help, and I give credit where credit is due. As far as I'm concerned, if you can survive the pandemic up until this point, you can basically survive anything. It has required people to work harder, make less. But, ultimately, if you came out of it, you were a Hell of a lot stronger." ■

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