

Commerce Approves Hundreds of Large-Crowd Events Amid Covid Outbreak

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By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Since Gov. Henry McMaster in August gave the state Department of Commerce – which isn't a public health agency – the authority to allow large-crowd events in South Carolina amid the coronavirus outbreak, the agency has approved more than 1,300 applications, records show.

Through Thursday morning, Commerce approved 1,345, or 90%, of the total 1,489 submitted applications, The Nerve found in a review of the department's [online](#) applications database. Seventeen approved applications involved estimated crowds, either on a single day or collectively over a longer time period, of at least 10,000.

That included University of South Carolina and Clemson University football games, and other college sports events; high school sports seasons; and local holiday events, such as annual Christmas parades in Gaffney, Mt. Pleasant and Summerville.

The Nerve's review found that of the 1,345 approved applications, 965, or about 72%, projected crowd sizes ranging from 251-1,001, while 324 estimated crowds of 1,001-5,000. Another 34 approved applications predicted crowd sizes of 5,001-10,000.

When The Nerve first [reported](#) in August about McMaster's executive order, there were 1,847 coronavirus deaths and 94,190 reported cases since the outbreak hit the state last spring, according to S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) records.

As of Thursday afternoon, total confirmed deaths and cases statewide stood at 7,010 and 419,435, respectively, DHEC records show.

In his Aug. 2 order, McMaster said a "gathering," defined as a "planned or spontaneous indoor or outdoor event that involves or is reasonably expected to involve a large number of people physically present," must be limited to 250 people or 50% of the location's legal occupancy capacity, whichever is less.

But McMaster gave Commerce the authority to grant "exceptions" to the crowd-size restrictions, requiring a Commerce "team" to review each request and provide an answer within 24 hours of receipt of the application. Any determination can be revised "in the sole discretion" of Commerce "at any point," under the order.

On its website, Commerce says it evaluates applications "in close consultation with DHEC," though under McMaster's order, all final decisions rest with Commerce, whose director – currently Bobby Hitt – is appointed by the governor under state law.

It's not the first time McMaster has allowed Commerce to make health-related decisions during the coronavirus outbreak. When McMaster in March ordered the temporary, statewide closing of what

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he deemed as “non-essential” by businesses and activities, he gave Commerce the authority to determine whether inquiring businesses were on the “non-essential” list.
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But McMaster didn't specify public health criteria to be used by Commerce in making those determinations, and Commerce's seven-person review panel had no public health or medical experts, as The Nerve [reported](#) then.

Asked Thursday who at Commerce evaluates applications for large-crowd events, agency spokeswoman Alex Clark referred The Nerve to an August written response in which she said the director and deputy director of the department's "Business Services" section "are or may be involved in the review of these events."

In a follow-up response today, Clark said Hitt is "not part of the formal evaluation team," though she noted he is "keenly attuned and regularly briefed."

Clark said Commerce and DHEC review each electronic application using "current CDC (federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) guidelines for mass gatherings." She said applications are rejected if the guidelines aren't met, and that Commerce notifies applicants of the "final determination."

Under CDC guidelines, the highest risk of COVID-19 spreading at events involve large "in-person gatherings where it is difficult for individuals to remain spaced at least 6 feet apart, do not wear cloth face coverings and travel from outside the local area."

"Virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings" are the lowest-risk activities, according to the guidelines.

Clark said the applications for large-crowd events outline "criteria for an event organizer to effectively demonstrate the ability to adhere to social distancing, mask requirements and CDC/accelerateSC guidelines," adding, "These events also have to adhere to less than 50% occupancy."

The Nerve's review of Commerce's applications database found that the listed reasons for rejecting 100 applications included such things as indoor events exceeding 50% of legal occupancy, or there were no submitted social-distancing plans.

The applications included requested exceptions for sports, musical and other festival events, and gun and car shows. The state's larger counties led in the total number of approved applications: Horry (244), Charleston (142), Greenville (132), York (131) and Richland (123), The Nerve's review found.

Most of the approved events already have been held, records show. Of the total 1,345 approved applications through Thursday, 287, or 21%, listed event start dates of Sunday through Nov. 20,

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including seven events with estimated crowd sizes of 10,000 or more, The Nerve's review found.

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The approved 10,000-plus-attendance events include collective estimated attendance during upcoming high school baseball, softball, tennis, track and field, soccer and golf seasons; the annual, three-day "Women of Joy" Christian women's event April 30-May 2 in Myrtle Beach; and the annual, three-day "Artisphere" festival May 6-9 in Greenville, records show.

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