

Top of the Morning



Illustration: Sarah Grillo/Axios

Fiesta Shows isn't the sort of business I generally cover in this space. It's a third-generation family operator of tilt-a-whirls and carnival midways that has never sought or raised outside funding from venture capital or private equity. When it has financial issues, it talks to a local banker.

- Fiesta normally pays the bills for hundreds of seasonal workers, and its events double as major fundraisers for churches, firefighters' associations, Boys & Girls Clubs, and other local nonprofits in New England.
- Its pandemic travails aren't as widely consequential as those of Airbnb or airlines, but they still matter.

"**We're at 100% hold**," says E.J. Dean, whose grandfather founded what would become Fiesta Shows in 1935.

- "The challenge we're seeing is the lack of guidance. In Massachusetts, for example, it looks like we're somewhere between Phase 3 and Phase 4 of reopening, but we don't really know when that will be — do we get to keep 20% of our 60 events? More? Less? There are no numbers to work from."

What's happening: The company has begun acquiring cleaning supplies and protective equipment for workers and customers, and discussing best practices with other show operators (some of which are being aped from theme parks).

- "We're still trying to figure things out. For example, we maybe have three times as many basketballs for those games, or maybe a big tray of hundreds of darts so we can keep cleaning them. And different types of cleaning compounds, depending on what is and isn't a high-touch piece of equipment."
- "A giant ferris wheel socially distances by design, so that at least works in our favor."

Fiesta Shows did get a PPP loan and believes it could probably survive into 2021 without a 2020 season, but it would be daunting at best.

As for employees, they're just waiting by their phones.

- The exception is those who Fiesta hires via H-2B visas, as they may be unable to enter the country.
- "The vast majority of our workers come back year after year. Right now, though, our staff is just the 10 people we keep year-round."

Confession: This one is personal. My father, uncle, and other family members worked for the Deans when they were younger. And E.J.'s father, Gene Dean, last fall "fixed" a water gun game at a county fair so that my daughter would win (shhhh ... don't tell her).

The bottom line: The carnival, a rite of New England summers, is closed until further notice, another victim of the coronavirus pandemic.

