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NLC: Food Trucks More Than a Passing Fad for Many Cities.

In spring 2013, Masters of Public Policy students at The George Washington University conducted research on local policy options for food truck regulations for the NLC. This blog post is based on their preliminary report, which will be made available to NLC members as a policy toolkit in the coming months.

Food trucks have expanded rapidly in both numbers and popularity over the past few years, and many cities are finding themselves ill-equipped to deal with these vendors from a regulatory perspective. Communities across the country, from Los Angeles to Philadelphia, are part of a burgeoning movement to find ways to better manage and regulate mobile vending.

City ordinances related to mobile vending were largely written decades ago, with vendors such as ice cream trucks, hot dog carts and sidewalk peddlers in mind. Needless to say, food trucks are not your mother's mobile vending experience. Most use large vehicles equipped with high-tech cooking equipment and sanitation devices to provide sophisticated, safe cuisine usually prepared to order (rather than pre-cooked).

So, what policy options do local governments have to regulate food trucks and incorporate food trucks into the fabric of a city?

City-specific solutions are definitely in order, but there are an emerging set of best practices to help tailor regulations so that both the city and the vendors realize the full spectrum of economic and social benefits that food trucks can bring to a community. Our evaluation produced some overall recommendations for NLC members, including:

Conduct town hall forums and private meetings with core stakeholders

Encourage dialogue and the building of relationships among competing stakeholders

Identify private vacant lots to create partnerships for mobile vendors to gather and sell

Designate public spaces specifically for mobile vending

In addition to the above recommendations, pilot programs can be a useful way to determine what regulations to adopt. Las Vegas currently has a pilot program in place that sets aside a certain number of downtown parking spaces as food truck parking only, and has a lottery system in place for those spaces.

Regulations can also incorporate strategies that steer food trucks to underserved areas of a city to address equity concerns, encourage economic development and alleviate food deserts. Cities such as Denver and Cincinnati have recognized the need for a targeted approach that brings food trucks to parts of the city outside of the core business district. Denver has considered several issues that might impact or encourage economic development, including whether food truck clustering combats food deserts, where restaurant options are constrained and the ability of food trucks to activate underutilized space (like surface parking lots). Cincinnati has seven mobile food truck zones in

strategic places around the city.

Due to their low start-up and upkeep costs, food trucks are proving to be an innovative way for entrepreneurs to create viable businesses, particularly as recent economic conditions have made it more difficult to start and operate a conventional restaurant.

The National Restaurant Association reports that they generated approximately $650 million in revenue in 2012– about 1 percent of total U.S. restaurant sales. And a recent research report by the Intuit Network predicts that food trucks will generate between 3 and 4 percent of total restaurant revenue – about $2.7 billion – by 2017, a fourfold increase from 2012. A 2011 survey by the research firm Technomic showed that 91 percent of respondents believe the food truck industry has staying power and is not a passing trend.

At a recent Food Truck Association event in Washington, D.C., food truck supporters had plenty of praise for the modern mobile vending industry. John Gaber, an urban planning professor at the University of Arkansas, noted that “food trucks are great things for communities; they provide more ‘eyes on the street’ for public safety and compliment the surrounding brick-and-mortar businesses.”

How will your city tap into these potential new sources of economic growth, entrepreneurship, equity, redevelopment, public safety, and community “flavor”?

by Emily Pickren

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