Food Without Walls: The Planning and Economic Development Benefits of Outdoor Food  

by Alex Iams, Commercial Development Planner, Arlington Economic Development

Google describes its Trends tool, which tracks search volume and news references, as “interesting and entertaining,” but warns it shouldn’t be used “to write your Ph.D. dissertation.” Perhaps Trends isn’t good enough for a dissertation, but it is an accurate reflection of America’s interests, whether it’s “Super Bowl” every February, “Where do I vote” every other November, or “Justin Bieber” since the middle of 2009.

One of the latest sensations on Trends is “Food trucks” which — based on search volume — have probably arrived at a curbside near you. Food trucks and carts have come a long way since the wrinkled hot dog days, and now deliver some of the trendiest and freshest foods around. Add in regular farmer’s markets and festivals, and the prevalence of Food Without Walls is probably at an all-time high.

This is good news for food lovers, and for planners and economic developers. The outdoor food trend is enlivening public spaces, training entrepreneurs, and enabling consumers to buy local products. Vendors are also breaking from the traditional food distribution channels, purchasing from local suppliers and nearby farms. And with success at the curbside or in the market, some vendors have made the transition to permanent space.

Outdoor food has gotten ahead of the rules in many places, prompting communities to revisit their regulations. This is good — many regulations pre-date the hot dog days — and it has led to important civic discussions about how to balance the benefits of outdoor food against the potential drawbacks.

Building Community

According to research and plenty of anecdotal evidence, people are embracing the uptick in outdoor food. A study commissioned by the City of Portland, OR found that 94 percent of customers who had visited a food cart had a “positive or very positive” impression of them. In Arlington, Virginia, the Crystal City Business Improvement District found that 96 percent of patrons at the Crystal City farmer’s market said it “improved or greatly improved” life in the neighborhood.

With consumers hungry for more, the number of outdoor food facilities is rising. Portland added 125 food carts in the past two years. Arlington issued 65 additional vendor permits in 2010. Columbus, Ohio has developed a fleet of 40 taco trucks. Los Angeles, the mobile food vending capital of America, has more than 9,500 mobile food vendors. New York City caps food cart permits at 3,100 and allows an additional 1,000 permits on a seasonal basis.

Outdoor food facilities are making economically productive use of public spaces, and making them more active, colorful and fun. Sometimes a food facility accentuates an already strong urban place — like a busy park or plaza — and other times it creates a place where none existed before, like a surface parking lot.

Unlike food vendors of the past, today’s vendors do not depend as heavily on passersby for business. They are using social media, particularly Twitter, to announce their location each day, and tell customers what they’re serving and how much food they have left.

Developing Entrepreneurs

Like any small business, operating an outdoor food facility is not for the unserious. However, it is an opportunity to start a business at less cost than the typical restaurant or retail store. With the economy in flux, bank financing for any food endeavor has been non-existent, and banks would be unlikely to fund an outdoor vendor regardless of economic conditions.

Thus, food entrepreneurs must come up with cash.

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Outdoor food facilities have responded to demand for fresh and locally grown products. In Charlotte, the Harvest Moon Grille cart serves dishes made from scratch using locally-grown ingredients. Drawing from at least ten farms (most within 100 miles), the menu at Harvest Moon changes all the time by design. In Portland, the Over the Top cart makes burgers from Oregon-raised game, such as elk, bison, and wild boar. In Seattle, Tiny’s Organic Fruit — available through farmer’s markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs — was formed when a wholesale fruit business transitioned to selling exclusively organic products.

Some initiatives are designed to bring fresh foods to lower-income neighborhoods and food assistance centers. The Greener Grocer, in Columbus, Ohio’s North Market, created “a farm market on wheels” called the Veggie Van. The van sells only Ohio-grown produce, and sets up in neighborhoods that may not have a nearby grocery store. The Arlington County Library, in partnership with the Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC), created a vegetable garden on the library grounds. Harvests from the garden are donated to Arlington families in need.

Regulatory and Policy Questions

With the increase in outdoor food facilities, jurisdictions have been revisiting regulations for outdoor vending and public space. For food trucks, the discussion has focused on where they can be and for how long. The trucks would like enough time to cover the morning rush or lunch break, but the rules often say they have to...
move every hour (or as little as five minutes). In many cities, the reality is that enforcement cannot keep up; in others, trucks accumulate bundles of parking tickets — preferable to paying rent, and accepted as a cost of doing business.

On sidewalks and public spaces, vendors must maintain a clear space from walking paths, bus stops, nearby buildings, and other vendors. Ten feet is a considered an acceptable distance. Cart size is also regulated. In Arlington, carts may not exceed seven-and-a-half feet in height, eight feet in length and five feet in width. In Portland, carts without wheels are considered buildings and they are subject to building and zoning code requirements.

Health standards are the first mobile food issue that officials are tackling in Los Angeles, where carts and trucks may soon receive letter grades, just like brick-and-mortar restaurants. Most cities require vendors to have a license from the Health Department and undergo regular inspections. Jurisdictions typically require that food vendors have a base of operation (or depot), where food conveyances can be cleaned and stored.

Communities are also considering the public resources expended in support of special events, like festivals. For example, sometimes the jurisdiction is compelled to close streets, deploy traffic or foot patrols, or pick up after events. Special event permit fees may not be enough to cover the costs, leading jurisdictions to wonder how often they want to allow events, and how much they are underwriting them.

Finally, outdoor food vending has sometimes been received negatively by rent-paying businesses in nearby buildings. Conflicts are more common in districts that already have healthy levels of foot traffic, and where outdoor vendors are selling similar products to what’s being sold indoors. As a result, mobile vendors may be unwanted where it is felt they are canceling out sales for existing businesses. Some jurisdictions are interested in setting up zones where vendors would (and would not) be allowed; others have instituted rent or fee programs for staking out in already-popular areas.

Here to Stay?
Most of the sensations on Google Trends, like “food trucks,” eventually lose some steam. Celebrities and politicians may flame out entirely, but food-related trends appear to be more resilient. For example, “Sushi,” “Farmer’s market” and even “Cupcakes” have maintained healthy search volumes for years. “Gourmet burger” began jumping in 2008 and has yet to come down.

While the growth in outdoor food facilities may level off, they probably aren’t going away. People are having too much fun buying, selling, and eating food outdoors. And on balance, our public spaces are benefitting. As planners and economic developers, it is our job to ensure that these facilities can exist harmoniously with the uses around them, and keep the fun going.

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Resources