

Embrace Downtown Food Carts

Who's afraid of food carts? Not me. I'm thrilled that the City Council recently approved revisions to a food cart ordinance, thanks largely to the Salem Food Cart Association and Councilor Diane Dickey.

Now food carts can stay in a location for as long as business dictates and cluster together in pods. Before they had to move every six months and be 500 feet apart.

Great news.

Food carts are a big success in Portland, drawing national acclaim from Bon Appétit magazine and CNN. So what's not to like about having a vibrant food cart scene everywhere in Salem, including downtown?

Nothing. But to some people here change is scary even when it is for the better. Diversity, creativity, more eating options... Eek!

At the July 14 city council meeting I was surprised to hear several councilors and restaurant owners talk about their Big Fear that people would flock to a downtown food cart pod and — oh no, the horror — enjoy eating there!

Theoretically, possibly, just maybe, the worry was that some of these people might choose a quick and easy food cart meal over a sit-down restaurant offering.

Well, this is called competition and free enterprise.

Even in the People's Republic of Portland, where downtown food cart pods harmoniously coexist with restaurants. On SW 9th and Alder there are more than 60 food carts; on SW 4th and Hall, 25 food carts.

Richard Foote and other Salem food cart owners spoke the truth at the council meeting. Their businesses bring people together, fostering a sense of community, adding life and vitality to an area.

Whatever brings people downtown is good.

Incoming city councilor Tom Andersen testified that during his campaign he visited 700 homes. Along with virtually unanimous opposition to a third bridge, he found very favorable attitudes toward food carts.

Andersen asked the City Council to imagine a food cart pod at the Civic Center's Mirror Pond or the Convention Center's Sculpture Garden, two downtown dead spaces. "Think of people and energy there, versus how they are now," Andersen said.

Oh, I am, Tom. Bring it on, food cart'ers.

There's nothing to fear from you, notwithstanding the job-loss scariness an Oregon Restaurant Association lobbyist tried to serve up at the meeting. Obviously food carts offer a different eating option than sit-down restaurants.

It makes as much sense to ban them from downtown as banning grocery stores would. After all, food can be bought from each, competing with restaurants.

The City Council should let Salem's food cart scene evolve naturally, responding to consumer demand.

Amending the city ordinance governing food carts was a wonderful example of bottom-up citizen initiative. The impetus came from creative, energetic people who didn't want anything standing in the way of them providing a desired mobile food service.

Portland, Corvallis, and Eugene all allow downtown food carts. Salem needs to continue to do the same, resisting unjustified fears of restaurants failing because a fresh way of dining has come to town.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com