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Bureaucracy on a bun served up to the city

Street Vendors

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A bid to spice up Toronto's street food has turned into a bland exercise in bureaucratic regulation, vendors and critics charged yesterday, with the city controlling everything from new menu items to cart design.

A pilot project approved by the executive committee will set up a two-tier system under the brand "Toronto a la Cart" that will allow 15 existing hot dog vendors to sell an approved list of healthy snacks such as seeds, nuts, bagels with peanut butter or prepackaged salad for an extra \$1,000 licensing fee.

But those who want to internationalize their menus with foods such as spring rolls, roti or empanadas will have to enter a city-judged competition to pick 15 winners and must purchase a new \$20,000 cart chosen by the city.

Hot dog vendors who initially embraced the possibility of serving more flavourful fare showed up at City Hall yesterday to complain the pilot is expensive, exclusive and complicated.

Marianne Morone, executive director of Toronto's Street Food Vendors Association, said the city is trying to "reinvent the wheel" instead of letting entrepreneurial cart owners cook up tasty new treats under already rigorous public health standards.

The city's expanded list of a la carte items existing vendors can sell is too expensive to be worth it, she said, and essentially means hot dog carts will be subsidizing the chosen few who get to spice up their offerings.

"They are throwing us a little bone saying that we can implement a few new foods but in implementing them, we are going to support their new foods," Ms. Morone said.

"So \$1,000 to add pretzels to my list I think is unconscionable. That's not a good enough menu improvement for the cost. Souvlaki would have been nice, gyros would have been nice, baked goods, things like that."

Nick Dimitropoulos, whose family has been selling sausages for decades, wondered why vendors who might want to serve souvlaki or gyros need to buy an expensive new cart instead of modifying their own.

Councillor John Filion (Willowdale), who has championed the idea of bringing healthy fare to the street, said requiring a new cart is necessary both to ensure food safety and the clear branding of a new product.

"It's a new program. The cart's are branded. You're in effect being part of a franchise without

paying a franchise fee. You can't just say, 'Hey, I have a hot dog cart. I should just be able to sell whatever I want.' It's a competition," he said.

"Once you get beyond hot dogs and get into more hazardous food items you need things like refrigeration. You have to keep hot foods hot, you have to keep cold foods cold, you have to have hand washing.

"You need all kinds of things you don't need if you're just selling hot dogs."

Mr. Fillion added that he expects competition will be fierce the first year to determine which 15 new foods get approval, but if successful he expects up to 50 different national dishes for sale on the streets of Toronto.

"You'll have to be the best example of street food from some region of the world," he said.

Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong (Don Valley East) accused the city of "nationalizing street food" even though Toronto has dropped earlier plans to buy the carts themselves and lease them back to vendors.

"This doesn't have to be this difficult. We just need some simple regulatory changes to allow for diversity in food," said Mr. Minnan-Wong.

"We don't have to create this bureaucracy, we don't have to spend tens of thousands of dollars to do it. We should allow these food vendors to do what they do best and to be successful without the city interfering with a whole bunch of red tape."

Adding The Spice

How will Toronto a la Cart work? - 15 existing hot dog vendors will be chosen to sell additional items such as seeds, nuts, whole fruit and prepackaged salads, for an additional licensing fee. - 15 winners will be chosen during a city-run competition to select the best examples of international street food. - The winners must purchase a \$20,000 cart from a supplier determined by the city that will be branded with the Toronto a la Cart insignia. - Eventually a third tier could be added to allow non-profit groups that promote healthy eating to have carts peddling nutritious items. - The pilot will cost the city \$86,000 this year for a new temporary staff member to administer it.

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