

Los Angeles in a stew over taco trucks

by Yahoo-News

Swarmed around Leo's Taco truck on Eagle Rock Boulevard, about 50 night patrons are stuffing their cheeks with carne asada tacos and chewing over one of this city's big controversies: taco trucks.

"Why should a taco vendor be able to park in front of someone else's restaurant and steal his customers away with cheaper food?" asks one man, spearing pinto beans on a paper plate with a plastic fork.

"But making them move every hour is a bad idea," says another as he orders a veggie burrito. "How can a truck vendor keep loyal customers if he has to move so often?"

These patrons, like many Angelenos, are as hot as salsa caliente over new rules that go into effect Thursday what to do with the 14,000 roving restaurateurs who have brought inexpensive entrees, a sense of community, intensifying competition for diners, neighborhood complaints, and a political brouhaha to the street corners of Los Angeles County.

The new county law makes parking a taco truck in one spot for more than an hour punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000 or six months in jail, or both. It replaces a longtime but rarely enforced measure that fined trucks \$60 if they stayed in one spot longer than 30 minutes. The law affects unincorporated areas of the city where about 60 percent of the population lives and includes East Los Angeles, one of the biggest concentrations of Mexican-Americans in the United States.

The five county supervisors passed the new regulations unanimously a month ago, saying the volume of complaints had reached critical mass in recent years.

With less-expensive menu items and lower overhead, the mobile kitchens were forcing established restaurants to close early and suffer losses, according to the East Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and other business groups.

Bricks-and-mortar restaurants charged that taco trucks were too often parking directly in front of their establishments and siphoning off customers. Growing pressures within the Los Angeles economy including the soaring prices of gasoline and food and slumping employment have exacerbated the tension between stationary merchants who have leases to pay, employ many more workers than the mobile vendors and who dearly need their patrons and parking.

"We have gotten so much negativity from the business community ... [complaining about] how much these trucks take away in business that we felt we had to listen and do something," says Maria Cerdas, a deputy for Supervisor Yvonne Burke. She says more and more trucks have ventured further into residential neighborhoods, where homeowners complain of loud gatherings and music until 2 or 3 a.m.

But the new law is generating a backlash.

Calling themselves the "taco resistance," some 150 of the city's 14,000 licensed vendors have stated they will refuse to comply with the law starting this Thursday. They have hired a lawyer, Philip Greenwald, a veteran of 40 years of representing mobile industrial caterers.

"These trucks pay taxes, they are inspected by the health department, and there is no legitimate reason to be pushing them around," he says. "This is not a matter of unfair competition but restraint of fair trade."

Others worry that one of the city's most distinctive social and cultural features could fall by the wayside.

"Thousands of Angelenos ... have long gathered at the trucks, in many cases since childhood, for quick carnitas burritos or mouthwatering cemitas, ... fired meat and other gut-busting goodness," says a recent editorial in the Los Angeles Times. "Call them what you will: roach coaches, loncheras, snack vans ... but taco trucks are a rich part of our region's heritage."

The Times and a leading political columnist in California, Dan Walters of the Sacramento Bee, have called for the county's supervisors to rescind the law as unfair to those at the lower end of the economic ladder.

On Wednesday, a grass-roots campaign (saveourtacotrucks.org), which has gathered thousands of signatures to petition a change in the law, is sponsoring "Taco Libre" the chance to enjoy a last mobile entree before the new law takes effect.

"The whole taco truck culture in L.A. fills a void left by traditional restaurants," says Aaron Sonderleiter, whose website trumpets the rallying cry, "Carne asada is not a crime." He says the lower price of truck-vendored food (tacos for a buck, giant burritos for \$2.50), longer hours of operation, and the outdoor venues create oases of neighborhood camaraderie, social interaction, and safety that are sorely needed in a city

dominated by car travel, gang crime, and little pedestrianism and public transportation.

"This is about more than delicious and inexpensive food," adds his Web partner Chris Rutherford. "It's about people and community and neighborhoods."

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