



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Food Trucks, Local Regulation, and Community Economic Development

By CED Program Interns & Students

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With the growing popularity of food trucks, cities and towns

across North Carolina are considering strategies to regulate the increasing number of mobile vendors selling meals while also recognizing the value of food trucks in terms of community & economic development. A food truck is a mobile, miniature commercial kitchen that must meet the state sanitation requirements of a brick-and-mortar restaurant and any other local ordinances.

Historically, street vending has been a fixture of urban life, providing economic opportunities for entrepreneurs with limited access to capital. The combination of low start-up costs, the ability to prepare food while mobile, and the utilization of social media has contributed to the current food truck phenomenon. The Institute for Justice, a nonprofit advocate for civil liberties, has published a detailed report entitled "Food Truck Freedom: How to Build Better Food Truck Laws in Your City ." The report estimates the cost to start a food truck is between \$25,000 and \$30,000, significantly less than the estimated \$750,000 needed to launch a restaurant. By taking advantage of the relatively low start-up costs, food trucks are able to sell inexpensive, diverse, and increasingly innovative foods to customers.

A recent Master of Public Administration capstone project sought to identify elements of an effective process for developing food truck policies for North Carolina local governments. Interviews were conducted with local government managers and planners in North Carolina to ascertain best practices. The major conclusion from interviews and other research is that an effective food truck policy will balance competing interests, maximize vendor flexibility and mobility in ways that do not compromise public integrity and that encourage positive community impacts.

Seventy-five percent of interviewed respondents recommend crafting mobile food truck policies flexible enough to support other areas of public interest, such as economic development and food system improvements. As one city manager responded, "Use food trucks in ways that affect the community broadly."

There is no single "right" way to regulate food trucks, particularly in consideration of the unique conditions that exist in each jurisdiction. Over-regulation can place limits on an entire community, however, and eliminate opportunities for advancing social goals, such as improving food delivery to traditionally underserved areas and/or triggering economic growth in districts targeted for revitalization.

With effective regulations, local governments can enable successful mobile food businesses while balancing the interests



of public health, safety, and overall community wellbeing. If regulated properly, mobile food vendors can contribute to the distinct environment and culture that their business brings to a community.

*Photo credit: Americanmeltdown.org.

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