



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: The Food Truck Diaries

By CED Program Interns & Students

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Although reminiscent of the 'grease trucks' that have been known to haunt college campuses and construction sites, the newest generation of *food trucks* is marching to the beat of a decidedly different drum. This new class of trucks, which has been described as "aggressively gourmet, tech-savvy and politically correct", has captured the fascination of city residents from Los Angeles and New York all the way to Durham, North Carolina.

In trying to explain the sudden surge of food trucks, many have pointed to the national economic downturn and high rates of unemployment as having provided the underlying impetus for upward trends in this movement. Others emphasize that in spite of the softening of the commercial real-estate market, the costs of opening a sit-down restaurant are still too high for most people given the credit crunch and tightening of individual and corporate budgets. Whatever the reason, the emergence and transformation of the street food industry provides a unique illustration of the sometimes overlooked intersection of municipal regulation and entrepreneurship — capturing the effects of local planning efforts on an ongoing cultural phenomenon.

As the food truck movement continues to gain momentum in cities throughout the state, local governments are being forced to mediate contentions between vendors, city regulations, and to a surprising extent, opposition groups. In deciding what to do, many city officials have found themselves at an impasse. Strong arguments have arisen on both sides of this debate, and have given way to a wide-spread questioning of the function and potential impacts of a growing food truck industry. As the debate over fair competition, health and sanitation, and public demand lingers on, cities are increasingly looking for innovative strategies to address issues related to the regulation of this industry.

Despite its apparent mainstreaming, the food truck industry has not yet been examined through an empirical lens. To help fill this gap, I have decided to use my master's project as an avenue to study the potential community and economic development impacts of the food truck industry, providing an empirical base that can be used in policy-making decisions.

Over my next several blog posts, I will profile the emergence of gourmet food trucks in North Carolina's Research Triangle region. In recent years, this region has seen upwards of thirty-five food trucks set up shop on the streets of Durham, Wake, and Orange counties. Due to their close proximity to one another, and varying regulations between municipal boundaries, the food truck industry in this region illustrates the complex interplay between market demand, institutional regulation, and the various stakeholders involved. An analysis of these trends will provide valuable insights to local municipalities as they search for balance through the implementation of policies that mitigate harmful consequences while maximizing foreseeable community benefits.