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Norfolk weighs proposal to allow food trucks in more downtown spots

By Elisha Sauers
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Darryl Smith | For the Virginian-Pilot
Ben Potter picks up lunch for his family from the Karnage Asada food truck at O'Connor Brewing Co. on Saturday.



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A line forms at the Karnage Asada food truck at the 3rd Annual Fall Crafted event at O'Connor Brewing Co. on Saturday.



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Visitors to the 3rd Annual Fall Crafted event at O'Connor Brewing Co. get their lunch from the Karnage Asada food truck on Saturday.



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NORFOLK

Donna Oard tries to dispatch one of her Karnage Asada trucks into the heart of the city at least once a week.

If the Latin-Asian taco vendor doesn't roll up, the lunch regulars tend to notice.

"We have a following," Oard said. "If I'm not downtown, I'm getting a phone call, or I'm getting a text."

It's been three years since Norfolk initiated its food truck program, which gave

restaurants on wheels a chance to do business in certain street areas. Oard, along with eight other food trucks, pays a \$350 permit fee in addition to her license and inspection fees to participate.

The program has evolved to include a handful of designated food truck zones, two of which are downtown: the 700 block of Granby St. in the arts district and the 100 block of Bank St. at MacArthur Square.

City planners said they think the time is right to tweak the program. The staff is introducing a proposal that would allow vendors – food trucks or any other retailer on wheels – to operate on some downtown private properties. The issue will go before the Planning Commission on Thursday, when it will decide whether to recommend the change to the City Council.

Before the program's launch, some City Council members resisted the idea of mobile vendors downtown, fearing they would present unfair competition to traditional restaurants in buildings. The council compromised in May 2013 by allowing them only in public rights-of-way downtown, giving the city more control over the vendors. Planning Director George Homewood said the city hasn't received feedback suggesting food trucks are hurting restaurants.

The new proposal would allow vendors on private lots, so long as they have permission from the owner, and on property zoned within the arts district and "regional center," an office district above Waterside Drive.

One of those requests came from Mary Miller, CEO of the Downtown Norfolk Council. She thought businesses with their own lots in the arts district, such as the Glass Wheel Studio, could benefit from the measure. Today, even The Plot, a paved temporary park in the 700 block of Granby St., requires a special event permit when it hosts vendors.

The zoning amendment would provide more flexibility, Miller said, "so we're not always having to ask for permission."

At a Planning Commission meeting earlier this month, Pollock Hart said the other request was for ADP, a New Jersey-based human resources firm opening a customer service center in 2 Commercial Place, next to the Bank of America tower. Officials have estimated the deal would involve at least 1,800 jobs.

"His thought was to allow a vendor to sell on his private property, to allow his employees to go out, get lunch and come back in quickly," she said.

But days after that meeting, it was unclear who, if anyone, asked the city for vendors at the office building. Frank "Buddy" Gadams, the developer and owner of the site, told The Virginian-Pilot he "didn't know anything about it." The office

project includes a full-service cafeteria that will be completed this fall, he added.

Lori Crouch, a city spokeswoman, said Norfolk has considered broadening its food truck program for a while anyway, and that Gadams “may not have known” about the vending proposal, which is officially being requested by the city. She added that ADP chose Norfolk because of its lively downtown, and expanding the food truck program could be a way to add to its “vibrancy.”

If approved, one downtown property that would not benefit from the change is Waterside District, a large project under development by Baltimore-based The Cordish Companies.

Though representatives from Waterside’s architecture firm, BCT Architects, described during a Planning Commission meeting in June a desire to have a food truck permanently at the site, Pollock Hart said its zoning doesn’t allow it. The project is within the city’s downtown waterfront district, which would not be affected by the vendor proposal.

Not surprisingly, Oard believes expanding the areas downtown where vendors can operate could be good for her truck. The business, which she and her husband started in Suffolk, moved to Norfolk because the city was welcoming to them, she said. Karnage Asada has since grown to two trucks and employs 11 people.

The couple plans to find a location for a brick-and-mortar restaurant in the next year. Oard said there’s no doubt they’ll open in Norfolk, based on the support they’ve received from the city for their food trucks.

“We look at Norfolk as being a home to food trucks because they will work with you and help you,” she said.

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