



A 'pilot to a pilot program' for food trucks may offer some insight into how the booming industry would fit into Somerville.

TRUCKIN'

by Aaron Dentel-Post

After months of dithering, Somerville's aldermen have taken a tentative step toward establishing a pilot food truck program. Roxy's Gourmet Grilled Cheese has been operating in Union Square weekly in August, and Lefty's Silver Cart is slated to operate in the square come September.

"Right now it's three weeks of Roxy's and three weeks of Lefty's," said Mimi Graney, executive director of Union Square Main Streets, which organizes the market. "We're just taking it one step at a time."

The question of whether to allow food trucks in Somerville has been a subject of much debate this year, with some aldermen arguing the trucks should be regulated. Others are skeptical they should be allowed in the city at all, arguing their presence comes at the expense of established brick and mortar restaurants that have higher overhead costs and therefore higher food prices.

The most recent discussions have centered on the establishment of a pilot program to test the waters of the industry and gauge how it would function in some of the city's neighborhoods.

At a July public meeting, City attorney David Shapiro said a pilot program would focus on several neighborhoods and ban new food trucks elsewhere in the city for a period of time.

Under current law, food trucks that are licensed by the state can station themselves anywhere traffic laws allow. While many squares and neighborhoods have come

up in discussions, Union Square has been mentioned most often as a place to experiment with the pilot program.

The ongoing Union food truck program – which grants the trucks permits for the period of time they are operating – should not be confused with an official pilot program. City spokesperson Jackie Rossetti said it could be considered a pilot to a pilot program, giving the City a sense for how an actual pilot program might work.

While Graney said the city was considering other neighborhoods for the pilot program, in Union Square, the ongoing program was cautiously approached and the trucks carefully selected. She said they wanted to have trucks that fit in with the community and already have a following.

In Union, Graney said, the trucks have been welcome so far. And she doesn't think they've hurt Union's quickly growing brick and mortar restaurant scene. "Our experience is that business creates more business," Graney said.

Erynn O'Neil, the owner and chef of Lefty's Silver Cart, said food trucks aren't trying to disturb existing businesses. "The people who live in and around

the square love good food," O'Neil said. "My concern is that we make it as evident as possible that we want to add to the culinary environment."

O'Neil said Lefty's, which is normally open Sundays in the South End and Wednesdays in the Seaport District, has had an easy time dealing with the Boston food truck program. She said Boston was very open to food truck operators and to the public.

Launched in June of 2010, Boston's program is also still in the experimental stages according to Edith Murnane, the director of food initiatives for Boston. Truck locations were based partly on an online survey asking residents where they'd like to see food trucks, and communities have remained active in the process of selecting locations and food trucks through their respective neighborhood councils.

Murnane also said that in Boston it seemed clear that food trucks brought pedestrians and business to sidewalks that were usually vacant. She said Boston often has

cluster sites for groups of trucks that provide more of a draw. "The truth is that it's the food trucks that are bringing pedestrians into those areas," she said.

In Boston, the food truck program involves a group

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of city representatives who encourage environmentally sustainable practices, healthy food choices and involvement with children and the homeless. It also works with businesses to develop routes that involve underserved neighborhoods.

Boston food truck permits require a multitude of certifications and business plans, along with proof of access to a restroom with hand washing facilities within 500 feet of their parked location. Boston's program disallows tables, chairs and dining areas. According to Murnane, attaining a license in Boston also requires – tellingly – that you sign a pledge not to compete with other businesses in the area.

Elizabeth Lint, the executive director of the licensing commission for the City of Cambridge, said the city has stopped issuing licenses for food trucks.

"We're pretty much of the feeling that if one leaves that's on city property, it will not be replaced," said Lint. "We had a set number of food trucks and we're not going to issue any more."

Lint said that Cambridge was unwilling to sacrifice parking space for the trucks, and said that regulations in Cambridge require that food trucks cannot do business within 300 feet of a brick and mortar establishment unless the food truck was there first. She also said that the hours for food truck licensing are done on a case-by-case basis.

Courtney O'Keefe, a Magoun Square resident who runs Ward5Online.com, said she felt a pilot program would be a good way to iron food truck issues out – specifically their proximity to brick and mortar restaurants. "My concerns are with the geographic placement

of food trucks," she said. "I really think a compromise can be reached that keeps everyone happy."

The issue is not unique to Somerville. Stephen Mackey, president and CEO of the Somerville Chamber of Commerce, said the sudden prominence of food trucks has caused many cities across the country to try to deal with the phenomenon. "The natural instinct is to ask about issues with competition," said Mackey. "But ultimately, the city shouldn't be anti-competitive."

Mackey said that none of the ordinances in the surrounding cities like Cambridge, Boston and Brookline would allow food trucks in Davis or Union squares. Boston, for instance, prohibits trucks in neighborhoods that already have a prominent culinary identity, like the North End. "We have to figure out how to do it," Mackey said. "We have to talk about best practices and get out there with a pilot program."

While the early Union program is underway, there is at least a light current pulling the trucks towards Davis, which already boasts a very active restaurant scene. The recently-released Davis Square Streetscape Improvement plan mentions the possibility

of establishing space for food trucks. The language, Rossetti said, was included in the plan as the result of resident feedback and does not necessarily mean anything will happen, but it has brought the concern of some restaurant owners in the square who might feel they have enough to worry about already with their brick and mortar neighbors.

"They're concerned because they have a super competitive environment right now," Alderman Jack Connolly said. ♦

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