

Published October 18th, 2017

Get your street feast on: food trucks staying in Orinda

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

Much to the delight of What's Up Downtown Orinda, the City Council agreed to continue the pilot food truck project on Thursday nights into the spring, while at the same time seeking a request for proposals for a permanent food truck event.

Local restaurateurs, however, were not unanimously happy with the pilot project. Representing the Chamber of Commerce, Executive Director Sophie Braccini told the council at the Oct. 5 meeting that formal restaurants felt no impact from the food trucks, but that the casual restaurants felt they were severely impacted. The choice of Thursday night was particularly galling to the restaurateurs, because Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday are the nights on which they earn enough to cover their bills. They asked that the project be discontinued, or moved to another night.

Respondents to a survey on the project were overwhelmingly positive, however, stunning the council with 90.5 percent of respondents wanting the project to continue, and rating it 4 out of 5 stars, although they expressed somewhat less enthusiasm for the long lines.

Javid Ebrahimi, the owner of Taste of the World, the food truck company running the pilot project, attended the council meeting with Samantha Ross, also of TOW. Ebrahimi said that the project exceeded their financial expectations, thanked the city and WUDO for their help, and stated that they wanted to continue the food truck event through the winter so people won't forget about them.

Ebrahimi discussed the possibility of a different night with the council. Apparently, no one has ever tried food truck events on Mondays. Tuesdays conflict with other events, like Concerts in the Park, and Wednesdays are an almost sacred swim event night in Orinda. The weekend would be even worse for the restaurants, so that left Thursday nights, which have proved to be very popular. However, Ebrahimi expressed his willingness to work with the restaurants to promote their businesses by advertising them on the food truck televisions, or by having a tent for local businesses at each event.

Council Member Dean Orr said the food truck event was a wonderful opportunity with a great deal of support. He had the sense that Orindans enjoyed the opportunity to bump into other community members at the event, and, while he expressed sympathy to all small businesses, he found the food trucks to be fundamentally different and so well supported it would be hard for him to vote against continuing the event.

Council Member Darlene Gee agreed that the pilot was a great success, a 100-percent positive, fun event that added to the community's enthusiasm about downtown Orinda. The pilot appeals to a wide variety of people, she said, and added that she was amazed at the openness and willingness of TOW to partner with local businesses. That sentiment was echoed by Vice Mayor Amy Worth, who added that some customers just came to the event for a beer, then moved on to a local restaurant for dinner. Council Member Inga Miller deemed the proposal to continue the pilot a "no brainer." She commended TOW for its outreach and Planning Director Drummond Buckley for the survey.

The food trucks collect and remit sales tax. Ebrahimi said he would like to be a registered business, but as yet Orinda does not issue business licenses. He was also open to the concept of a fee, which will be incorporated into the RFP.

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