

Food Trucks and London—HURRAH!

March 2015 Column by Gord Hume

It was with a certain amount of glee that I watched as City Council recently approved a trial project for 8 food trucks to hit the streets of London this spring.

It was seven, maybe eight years ago that I became the first to raise the issue of food trucks for London. I was still on city council and exchanged some emails and a chat with the then Medical Officer of Health and a couple of officials inside city hall. There was pretty much zero interest.

The Health Unit hid behind some quaint provincial regulations about only dried or cured meats being able to be sold on the street, which explained why hot dogs and sausages were about the only street food Londoners could get. All I knew was that food trucks were exploding across a few North American cities and the public response was fabulous.

The issue continued to float around city hall. There was a lot of interest but it failed to generate a very high priority. All the evidence from other communities was that food trucks were delivering really interesting food combinations to a motivated customer segment that was growing. In fact, cities like Portland, Oregon had sufficient response to make it one of their main tourist attractions as well as ferocious support from locals who lined up for the tasty treats.

It was with utter dismay that I watched the previous Council fumble the issue for three years. They followed in the well-trodden footsteps of Toronto, which for four years showed how not to support creative concepts by coming up with overly-officious and bureaucratic regulations and restrictions that put an abrupt halt to food truck innovation. After public scorn and media floggings, Toronto's Council eventually back-tracked and softened the regulations substantially.

What is amusing in the debate is that other cities have moved swiftly and decisively to approve what many people feel is a relatively simple concept. Calgary, for example, approved their plan within months.

The previous London Council spent three years bouncing the issue around, caving to self-interested lobby groups, inventing torturous explanations for why London couldn't do what other cities had already done and what the public clearly wanted to happen. The issue became symbolic of a city council stuck in a muddy path of self-destruction and incompetence. The voters quite properly turfed most of them out last October.

So hurrah to this new Council and its swift action to resolve what had become embarrassing to people who want London to be perceived as a progressive, dynamic and fun community.

London, fun? Yes, fun. London needs to push for more openness, creativity, enjoyment of our public places and spaces and to make this city a great place to visit—and an even greater place to live.

This new Council didn't cave in to last-minute legal challenges. It spent sufficient committee time to craft a reasonable and responsible policy that most Londoners seem to support. It approved the new policy 15-0, somewhat surprising council observers as at least one returning council member had so vigorously opposed the concept last term. Ah well, let's just move on and hope that entrepreneurs will come forward to give hungry Londoners some exotic new tastes of street food this summer.

If this issue was a bit of a litmus test for the new Council, congratulations to them—they passed. London, Ontario can provide fun, innovative and creative connections for tourists and locals through this modest but important addition to our street scene. Happy munching—and I'll see you at the food trucks.