

Food carts part of ongoing business debate in Sisters

By **Jim Cornelius**
News Editor

The recent approval of the siting of food carts at Eurosports in downtown Sisters has pulled the scab off of an ongoing and sometimes contentious debate over the types of business that should be allowed and encouraged in Sisters.

There is longstanding tension between some proprietors of “brick-and-mortar” businesses and low-overhead non-brick-and-mortar businesses operating out of tents or stands — or carts. Some see such businesses bringing more people into town to shop, to the benefit of all businesses. Others see them as taking advantage of the business climate created by existing businesses and “skimming the cream” without the long-term commitment and expense incurred by downtown merchants.

For some, alternative vendors create a sense of vibrancy and activity, while others see them as detracting from the aesthetics of the recently renovated downtown core.

To a large extent, all views are subjective. It is difficult to quantify the impact — positive or negative — of alternative vendors on merchants’ bottom line. And the effect may vary from store to store, with some reaping benefits and some taking a hit. And aesthetics, of course, are in the eye of the beholder.

Another aspect to the same discussion is the question of “formula foods.” The city has been debating for years how to properly define what a “formula food” establishment is and whether and how many should have access to the Sisters market to compete with local “mom-and-pop” or

boutique restaurants.

Eurosports owner Brad Boyd is a 25-year brick-and-mortar merchant in Sisters — and he is planning to bring in alternative vendors.

Eurosports rents and sells recreation equipment, winter and summer. Boyd purchased the corner lot and moved the 25-year-old business last spring and summer. He also sells micro-brew beers and is trying to develop the courtyard into a pleasant place for people to hang out — “a cool, fun space.”

The food cart operators will pay Boyd an annual lease. He hopes to establish whatever number is viable as permanent fixtures — though he acknowledges that there may be turnover. An analogous business model would be the burrito and taco stand located at Space Age Gas or the small kitchen adjacent to Sisters Market that has housed a Hawaiian food stand and a gourmet hot dog stand.

The idea is to create a destination stop for people looking for a particular kind of eating experience.

“A food cart pod is what the county calls them,” Boyd said. “It’s a food cart pod.”

He believes that food carts will enhance the downtown experience for visitors — many of whom come from cities where they are an established dining option. Food cart pods draw traffic in other cities and that is the model Boyd hopes to develop.

“They bring people to that area,” he said. “More people in the downtown area is a good thing.”

Others have concerns.

“After the road project, town looks so good and I feel it brings the aesthetic level down,” said Melissa Ward,

who wrote a letter of opposition to Boyd’s site plan application.

She disputes the way the city planning staff defined food carts.

“To make the food carts just like restaurants is a very crude assessment, in my opinion,” she said. “A very convenient but crude assessment.”

Ward, who operates a long-time business of her own in the downtown core, says she believes there is a major distinction between the brick-and-mortar merchant and the alternative vendor.

“We’re a part of the community,” she said. “We contribute. We donate to every single thing that comes through the door. You can’t ask that of a food cart.”

Similar feelings have been expressed regarding transient vendors who set up during the Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show and at vendor fairs during the summer. Controversy over these issues blossomed anew when Celia Hung and Richard Esterman proposed using a vacant lot at the corner of Cascade Avenue and Pine Street for a series of vendor-based events.

Chuck Humphreys, an economist by trade and a former member of the Sisters Planning Commission says that such tensions are common.

“It’s what happens in every economy,” he said. “You have established businesses that want to protect

themselves.”

Humphreys, who is a friend of Boyd’s, thinks that food carts will be a benefit to Sisters — and less of a threat to other establishment than some might believe. While the city considers food carts dining establishment from a legal and planning standpoint, from an economist’s standpoint there are key differences.

“It’s a different product,” Humphreys said. “Restaurants sell food, but they also sell the place to eat it, the ambiance ... people are buying that experience to some extent.”

By offering a different option, “food carts are a way of making the eating scene more vibrant.”

It’s also a relatively low-cost means for a food entrepreneur to break into the marketplace.

“If these are a low-cost way of somebody getting into the business, that’s good,” he said.

Humphreys disputes Ward’s point about contribution to the community.

“A food cart owner could be a local person. It doesn’t have to be somebody from out of town,” he said. “Just because they’re not a brick-and-mortar doesn’t mean they don’t have the same social values.”

What and how much the city should do to regulate alternative forms of commerce has been a difficult question to navigate. Acting

to limit competition and set barriers to entry into the marketplace is a dicey proposition. Standards have to be clear and if you’re setting limits, the allocation system for the available “slots” has to be equitable, Humphreys argues.

“Doing it in practice is not so easy. Any time you try to control competition you have to be very cautious and have a real clear explanation of why that is justified,” Humphreys cautioned.

Though aesthetics are obviously subjective, that is one area where government can act effectively.

“You’d hate to have ratty sorts of things all around town,” Humphreys said. “I’m sympathetic to that kind of concern. That can be managed. You can set standards.”

In Sisters’ case, those standards revolve around the city’s Western theme. The food carts sited on the Eurosports property will be required to conform to that theme.

It’s tough to make a go of it in business in a seasonal economy like Sisters. And, Humphreys notes, the competition Sisters businesses — including restaurants — face is region-wide, not just within town. Success “is always fragile.”

But, he argues, competition is essential to vibrancy.

“Is it a threat or an opportunity?” he says. “The classic kind of things a management consultant would talk about.”

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