

FOOD

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must be at least 400 feet from other restaurants and in the city's outlying commercial zone, which does not include downtown. Trucks must move every night, can only operate until 10 p.m. and cannot provide seating.

About 89 percent of respondents to the survey so far have said that the city should allow food trucks downtown. Similar numbers supported temporary licenses for mobile vendors and the creation of a "pod" where multiple food trucks could park. About 80 percent of respondents supported an amendment that would allow small carts that can be pushed by hand in addition to the current large trucks.

On Monday Jose Garcia, chair of the Hispanic Advisory Committee, said he knew of another woman who, like Hunt, had applied for a license and was told there were none available. So she packed up her family and moved to Pasco to start a taco truck there.

Among the city's three current mobile vendors, opinions are mixed on possible updates to the rules.

Rigo Garcia drives his taco truck down from Pasco and parks across the street from the Hermiston post office every morning, firing up the grill in time to open by 10 a.m. Customers park in the public lot there and order up tacos, carne asada, torta and more to eat in their cars or sitting on their tailgates.

Garcia is grateful to have the opportunity to operate in Hermiston, but he said some of the city's rules for mobile food vendors make it difficult. He wishes he could provide seating, for example, and that he didn't have to drive his truck back up to Pasco every night.

"I don't understand why they say I have to move," he said.

Garcia said people may have pushed for an ordinance because there is a stereotype that food trucks are dirty and unsafe, but he buys high-quality ingredients and follows the same food-handling guidelines as restaurants.

"Some people think the taco trucks are dirty, but I'm very clean, personally," he said. "I cook fresh meat every day. I clean the grill every day. I love my customers."

Tacos Paricutin, often parked behind Cottage Flowers, is one of the trucks that chose to remain open after the 2013 regulations were put in place. Maricela Medrano, serv-

ing up tacos to customers last week, said her parents have run the business for 24 years and didn't have an issue applying for a license and complying with city regulations.

They hadn't had to make many changes, and hadn't been interested in providing seating anyway.

"Everything's good," she said, shrugging.

Tacos Xavi owners Gabriela Rodriguez and Luis Diaz also chose to stick around after the new regulations were put in place.

Rodriguez said they had to make some adjustments, but they had decided it was worth it to do what they needed to continue operating in Hermiston.

"We live from that," she said of the business. "It's our income."

They have operated since 2010, first as a trailer on Main Street and then as a truck behind Payless Shoes. Diaz said they have grown during that time, adding employees and menu items. They had looked into setting up a sit-down restaurant, he said, but their customers tend to be people who have 30 minutes for lunch and are looking to grab something quickly and be on their way. A food truck is more conducive to that.

"People want their food fast," he said.

During Monday's city council meeting councilor John Kirwan, who was on the committee that wrote the ordinance along with Manuel Gutierrez and then-councilor George Anderson, said that while the city is considering changes to the ordinance they needed to remember it was adopted in the first place because there had been issues with mobile vendors. Many of them were "mobile" in name only and spread out to become eyesores, he said. There were problems with how people were disposing of their wastewater, and customers of the food trucks were loitering and then using the bathrooms of nearby businesses.

"There still needs to be some regulations," he said.

Mayor David Drotzmann told Hunt and others who testified in favor of changing the rules that the council did understand that they may be too strict and was open to the idea of making some changes.

"Sometimes the pendulum swings too far," he said.

After the online survey at hermiston.or.us closes on Sunday, city staff plan to bring back recommendations for a city council vote on possible amendments to its mobile food vending ordinance.

WATERMELONS

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melons absorb heat during the day, which the plants metabolize into sugar for energy. Once they cool off at night, the respiration process slows down and all that sugar gets stored in the fruit, hence their exceptionally sweet flavor.

Walchli said this year has been a mostly typical growing season, compared to last year when planting got off to a slow start.

"Last season, we had a colder start and this year we had a more favorable May and end of April," he said. "It's hard to predict. Melons are very reactive to the weather, more so than some of the other crops."

Scott Lukas, assistant professor of horticulture for Oregon State University, recently started a new research program at OSU's Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center with a partial focus on watermelons. He said growers have reported few issues with disease pressure, and for the most part the vines have been growing well.

"This has been a good season so far," Lukas said. "I've heard the plants are looking good, and they are growing as they should."

Hired by HAREC in 2016, Lukas has spent the last couple of years studying treatments for soil-borne fusarium and verticillium wilt diseases in watermelons. He plans to expand his program next year to include more irrigation trials using remote sensors to monitor soil moisture, and help farmers conserve water.

Precision agriculture and modern technology have led to increased yields, which in turn has helped to expand markets for Hermiston watermelons throughout the region, said Chris McNamee, a sales representative for Botsford & Goodfellow.

Based in Clackamas with a field office in Hermiston, Botsford & Goodfellow handles all marketing for Hermiston watermelons. McNamee said watermelon sales have increased every year for the last five years, and the Hermiston brand has become firmly established in major metro areas including Portland and Seattle.

"They've supported us really well," McNamee said. "It's allowed us to

grow, which is great."

In 2012, Florida, Georgia, California and Texas accounted for two-thirds of all watermelon production across the country. Though Hermiston may account for just a blip on the national watermelon radar, McNamee said they are undeniably popular in the Northwest.

"They get the sugar right, and they get them picked at the right time," he said. "It stands out compared to the competition."

Jack Bellinger, with Bellinger Farms, said he has already cut about a dozen watermelons off the vine and is excited about this year's quality, which he attributes to a consistent growing season.

"People are getting excited to see them on their plates. And we are excited too," Bellinger said. "The quality this year I think is going to be really exceptional."



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Food truck survey online

The city of Hermiston is considering changes to its mobile food vendor ordinance and is conducting a survey.

The survey is available in English and Spanish on the city's website at hermiston.or.us until July 15.

Residents can give feedback on the number of licenses for food vendors, the idea of a food truck pod, whether smaller food carts like hot dog stands should be allowed and whether the city should issue temporary licenses.

Golfers to tee off for Eastern Oregon Mission

Golfers interested in teeing off for a cause are encouraged to participate in an upcoming tournament that will benefit Eastern Oregon Mission.

Scramble for Food is Saturday with check-in at 8 a.m. and the shotgun start at 9 a.m. at Big River Golf Course, 709 Willamette St., Umatilla. A four-person scramble format, those who plan to participate should register as soon as possible.

The cost is \$60, which includes pastries in the morning, 18 holes of golf, prizes on every hole, lunch

and awards. Registration forms are available at Agape House, 500 Harper Road, the Hermiston Community Center, 415 S. Highway 395; and Bendixsen Law, 245 E. Main St. For questions, call Dave Hughes at 541-571-7293. To reserve a golf cart, call 541-922-3006.

Eastern Oregon Mission is the parent organization of Agape House and Martha's House, which serve individuals and families in need. For more information, to volunteer or make donations, call 541-567-8774.