

Should small towns allow outside food trucks?

BY BECKY MCCRAY



A reader asked me about outside food trucks invading a town of about 2,500 people. It's a good question, and I'm glad to have a chance to share it with you.

I am having a hard time in our small town with food trucks wanting to set up for a couple days of the week? I believe that we should be supporting our local restaurants and not allow these trucks to come in. We currently have 3 restaurants, and they have a hard time keeping their doors open. My take is that they are contributing to our economy in Sales Tax and County Taxes where these food trucks do not bring anything to our community. I understand that our citizens would appreciate something different but do we allow this at the costs of business owners in our town?

If you've got trucks coming in, let's take that as a good sign. That means you have enough customers and life in your town to draw them in. That's good, right? Other towns are so dead that no one wants to do business there. So that's a positive sign for this town.

I agree that none of us like to see out of town businesses cutting into the prosperity of our town and exporting their profits. That doesn't mean we can't figure out a way to benefit.

It will never go back to the way it was.

Realize that you can't keep food trucks out. Banning never works. Ban trucks from inside city limits, and they'll set up right outside. And when a local budding entrepreneur decides to start a food truck of their own, then what do you do? Do you ban him or her, too? Not allowing them isn't the answer.

You have to start from here and go forward

If your restaurants are having a hard time staying open, maybe that's an important sign

about quality, cleanliness, or just the freshness or newness of them. It would not be very much different if an interesting new restaurant opened in another building in town and cut into their business. You can't really choose favorites here. And it may well be time for local restaurants to step up their game, improve their business and be the kind of fresh and interesting place that can compete with food trucks. Heck, maybe they could learn to start their own food truck and expand their business to more locations, to everyone's benefit.

Be Idea-Friendly

Next, figure out how to help the trucks actually contribute to your community while they are there.

- Can they park in a place that actually benefits someone, like near a local store that could use a boost?
- Can other local businesses or vendors or crafters or artists or budding entrepreneurs open [little pop-up store booths](#) next to the trucks, like an instant mini-downtown?
- Can the trucks support local aspiring chefs or food entrepreneurs or students by giving them training and experience so they can get their own business started?
- Can the trucks participate in special events when you need them?
- Can they stay late and support [later shopping hours in your downtown](#)?
- Can they cooperate on a themed event, like a [progressive dinner or a safari supper](#), that includes local restaurants?

Get creative. Ask the truck owners how they can help make your town a better place and give back to the people who are supporting them.

Those are some ideas. My best advice is this: **be open to the idea, and friendly to change.** Change is already here, and with some creativity, maybe you can turn it into a catalyst for good things.

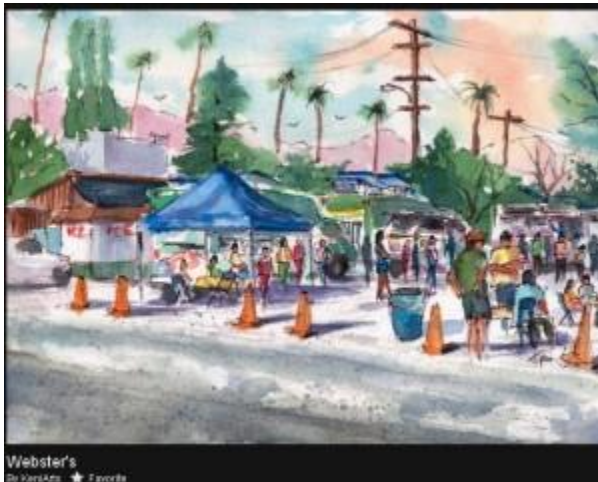
How they do trucks in Altadena

After I shared this story in the [Positive View of Rural email](#), I heard back from Lori Elliott Webster of Altadena, California. Here's her experience:

Just thought I'd email you about having food trucks in a small town to help liven things up, Becky.



We have a shop in Altadena, California, just 3 miles north of Pasadena yet a world away. We've always been a rural bedroom community of Pasadena – since the freeway came and the entrance to the Angeles Crest Highway into the San Gabriel Mountains was moved to nearby La Canada, our community has become an out-of-the-way place, and most people like that just fine. We still can keep horses here, and it's not unusual to see them out and about the streets of Altadena. Accordingly, the pace is a little slower here, and people are used to going down into Pasadena to do their shopping. My husband's family owned a retail store(s) here since 1926. Things got rocky back in the mid-1980s, and to keep the store afloat, sold off portions of the store as stand-alone businesses in 2007. They finally sold the pharmacy business 5 years ago, and ended up selling the entire property at the end of 2013. We ended up moving to another neighborhood in town.



In 2010, we and the new owners of the pharmacy next door decided to create a food truck night. We called it "Fancy Food Truck Friday", and once a month six or seven food trucks rolled into the parking lot. We rented tables and chairs and the town loved it! We did, however, have some people with misgivings in the beginning. **We heard many of the same complaints mentioned in your article, and yet our neighboring restaurants had never been busier!** Many of the food trucks were from the LA area, so they weren't really from out of town. It was great fun, and helped boost interest and spending in a sleepy area. I know that for our store, we got many people to come through, and usually had great sales on food truck nights. I say it's a great way to liven up an area, and although food trucks are almost

passé here anymore, other parts of the country are just beginning to experience them. We found the truck owners more than willing to join in for charitable donations, and other civic events. I've attached a picture of one of the food truck events, and a local artist's interpretation of one of evenings.

Best,
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About Becky McCray

Becky started Small Biz Survival in 2006 to share rural business and community building stories and ideas with other small town business people. She and her husband own a retail liquor store in Alva, Oklahoma, and a small cattle ranch nearby. Becky is an international speaker on small business.

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1.



Monica says

FEBRUARY 24, 2016 AT 5:55 PM

Would not consider a food truck a good idea— local restaurants pay property tax, employ many people, are there when you want them—and make up the fabric of a town.

- o



Becky McCray says

FEBRUARY 28, 2016 AT 8:33 AM

I'm a local business owner, too, and I also have to deal with competition. My point is food trucks are here to stay. So it's up to us to make the best of them while still supporting our local restaurants. Several ideas in the article to help you do both.