

Putting the cart before the food

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Issa Ashtarieh is a Toronto a la Cart street vendor who sells Middle Eastern food near Queen's Park. After a problem-plagued first two years, he doesn't know if he will be back next year. (Sept. 17, 2010)

RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR

When city officials chose Bridgette Pinder to introduce healthy Caribbean street food to Torontonians, she felt honoured and thrilled.

But after two summers selling jerk chicken and rotis in the three-year "Toronto à la Cart" pilot project, she is bitter and bankrupt.

"Anybody asks me about this program — I feel like I'm going to vomit," Pinder declared one sunny day last week in front of several customers lined up at her silver cart at King and Bay Sts.

"The city — à la Cart — bankrupted me."

The retired mental health worker is not alone. Just one of the eight vendors selected for the pilot program is certain of returning next summer for the final year. Others have given up or are demanding concessions from the city to return. Several haven't paid their 2010 location fees.

The ethnic food program — offering everything from bulgogi to souvlaki — is in a shambles.

So, how did a well-intentioned effort to reflect the diversity of Toronto through street food go so sour?

The answers, critics say, can be found at city hall and reflect political mismanagement and bureaucratic red tape.

In some ways, the story of the program is an illustration of why voters appear so angry with Mayor David Miller and his left-leaning council.

"This is why people are fed up," said Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong, an early à la Cart critic who argued ethnic eats could be introduced with a simple change in regulations and proper health and safety safeguards.

"It's a classic example of the city meddling, going wild with rules, and ignoring the experts — people who stand by their (hot dog) carts all day. It's arrogance, it's mismanagement."

Souvlaki seller Kathy Bonivento figures she and her husband are out \$80,000.

“We all thought we were pioneers — that’s what the city told us we were — and together we’d mold the program and make it good,” she says.

“We went into the project in good faith and came out financially destroyed. Why are we stuck with the screw-up?”

Interviews with the vendors and city officials point to key decisions that set the stage for failure.

Public health in charge

The entrepreneurial endeavor was created and initially run by Toronto public health, at the behest of the public health chair, Councillor John Filion. Council approved the project 34-5.

Vendors say the health manager assigned to help them had no experience in hospitality or small business. Menu changes had to be approved by the city’s medical officer of health.

“When we asked for other changes, with the cart or location, we were told council would get a report once a year,” Bonivento says.

Hot dog vendors are overseen by municipal licensing and standards.

Filion, who in January 2009 predicted the vendors would earn “a very, very good income,” says public health was capable of running the program but acknowledges there were problems with the execution.

In an email, Susan Sperling, a spokeswoman for the department, said the public health staff “were always available for consultation throughout the first year,” except for four weeks during the 2009 civic workers’ strike, when the manager was redeployed.

À la Cart was transferred to economic development in November 2009.

Bushels of red tape

From day one, vendors were wrapped in red tape. The original 15 in the program were reduced to eight after many balked at rigorous requirements, including the requirement that anyone who already held a hot dog licence had to give it up to participate; no signs allowed on the “uniform look” carts; a preference for “locally sustainable produced foods”; and a requirement that owners personally work the cart at least 70 per cent of its operating time (later reduced to 50 per cent).

Filion, running for re-election in Ward 23, says strict health regulations were needed but he was surprised vendor selection was “ridiculously formalized. I’m not trying to say the whole thing failed because of the bureaucracy but, unfortunately, that’s the way some things happen.”

The carts

Above all else, vendors say, they failed because of the \$30,000 cost of the carts and many other limitations. Instead of considering existing cart models, staff drafted a thick list of specifications and tendered for a custom-built version. Only one firm, Crown Verity, bid. The result was a cart that weighs 360 kilograms, is not towable, has a small countertop, a malfunctioning freezer and takes two people four exhausting hours a day to load and unload from a truck or trailer.

“You’ve told us we need to run a mobile business and you’ve provided us with a cart that’s immobile,” Bonivento says.

Seemab Ahmad, a civil engineer by trade, says he other vendors spotted problems immediately but there was no prototype, only the finished product.

“The biggest obstacle to success is the cart itself. You can’t fight that.”

Noorullah Iman, a father of five with a three-bedroom apartment and debts that threaten to bankrupt him, says he quit the program after realizing kebab and samosa sales would never cover his \$1,500-a-month cart loan.

Filion acknowledges “the whole cart thing was a fiasco.” He says he thought there would be “collaborative” process with a designer and vendors and was “astonished” by what happened.

Sperling says cart specs were formulated by a committee with representatives from health, fire, licensing and economic development.

“The criteria was developed to minimize the public risk of foodborne illness and maximize fire safety, while also

ensuring a durable, high-quality, easy-to-clean cart,” she said, adding that vendors got technical drawings early and some of their suggestions were incorporated.

Last winter, vendors were invited to return their carts to Crown Verity for improvements, some cost-shared by the company.

The locations

Vendors complain they were given bad, unresearched locations with fees of up to \$15,000 a year that had no basis in reality.

Last summer, Andnet Zere tried to sell Eritrean injeras at Roundhouse Park, south of the CN Tower, while mud flew from construction around her. Two authorized moves later, she quit. Apparently prime locations, like the southwest corner of Nathan Phillips Square first tried by Bonivento, saw fierce competition from hot dog hawkers and chip trucks. The city offered some new locations for 2010 and reduced fees for some. Half the vendors moved.

Sperling says the sites were chosen by a staff committee that considered “perceived pedestrian traffic.” Vendors were told the city did not do pedestrian counts or market research, and were encouraged to do their own homework.

A manager added some “on-street” locations and the list went to Filion, who consulted councillors about proposed spots in their wards. The final list was approved by city council.

Katherine Roos, the city’s manager of small business given the job of helping vendors this year, says most operated for shorter hours than expected and didn’t take up her offers of help.

“Ultimately, the vendors are independent business owners and make their own decisions on how many hours they work and whether or not they participate in special events,” she said, noting that a few own other businesses.

An independent review of à la Cart is beginning, Roos said. A report should go to the new economic development committee in January.

Filion says some vendors — he won’t say who — “made some really bad business decisions.” While no longer involved in à la Cart, he says failing vendors “need to formally drop out, rather than stay in the process and not pay their fees, and we need to fill their spots as soon as possible.

“I don’t think anyone is going to compensate them for their losses, but, going forward for a third year, we need to add some members and give the program some oomph.”

As her lineup dwindles, Pinder scoffs at the idea others will join, much less prosper.

“You can’t have eight vendors and seven of them fail and it all be their fault,” she says.

“This program, unintentionally or not, was designed to fail.”

Down and out

Bridgette Pinder: Jerk chicken and roties. Bankrupt, but still vending. Question mark for 2011.

Kathy and Blair Bonivento: Souvlaki. Worked cart briefly this summer. Question mark for 2011.

Seemab Ahmad: Central Asian and Persian cuisine. Cart operated most of summer. Question mark for 2011.

Noorullah Iman: Kebab and samosa. Quit in the summer.

Andnet Zere: Eritrean injeras. Considered to have quit.

Young Jin Kim: Korean food. Planning to continue in 2011.

Issa Ashtarieh: Falafel and kebab. Question mark for 2011.

Nancy Senawong: Thai. Question mark for 2011.