The Fight for Fair Food in our Streets

Since very early on in the formation of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, there has been strong support for street food vending. In communities across California, street food is a part of food culture and dynamic street life, and sidewalk vendors provide communities with delicious foods such as fruits and vegetables. In food desert communities–and particularly in the absence of healthy food retail development–fruit and vegetable sidewalk vendors can help to fill a void by providing fresh food to the local community that may struggle to access them otherwise.

Up until recently, the City of Los Angeles was the only major city in the United States, and one of the only cities in LA County, without a sidewalk vending permit program. Due to a new President in 2017, and increasing stresses on immigrant communities across California, then Senator Ricardo Lara (now California Insurance Commissioner) introduced SB 946 in early 2018, the Safe Sidewalk Vending Act. The bill allows local jurisdictions to develop sidewalk vending regulations as they relate to public health, safety, and welfare. Additionally, the bill decriminalizes sidewalk vending, a critical step in protecting sidewalk vendors, many of whom are immigrants.

The LA Food Policy Council and key partners such as Inclusive Action for the City (formerly LURN), the East LA Community Center (ELACC), street vendors themselves, and many others, had been working on legalizing street vending since 2011. Since then, LAFPC had a dedicated street vending Working Group, and they hosted a summit in 2017 to hear from street vendors themselves about what is needed. The legislation was ultimately able to be passed largely because of a strong coalition that supported the bill known as the California Street Vendor Campaign, made up of immigrant rights, economic justice, and faith-based organizations.

Sidewalk vendors are excited for the implementation of sidewalk vending because it means that they can finally obtain a permit that will legitimize their business. However, the work is not over. The new program for street vendors requires multiple levels of permitting such as a sidewalk permit, a public health permit, a compliant food cart, and more. These processes are both lengthy and very costly for existing vendors. It is important to remember that many of these sidewalk vendors are low-income entrepreneurs who need extra assistance to be compliant with public health regulations; these vendors are largely immigrants, mothers, elderly individuals, and members of other socioeconomic groups with limited ability to cover these hefty start up costs.

Moving forward, the Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign, which LAFPC is a part of, will continue to work with sidewalk vendors so that they can enter the formal sidewalk vending economy. In particular, LAFPC has facilitated trainings on food justice and healthy food menu options. Other organizations in the coalition are working to inform sidewalk vendors of their rights, connect them to financing options, and learn about other city requirements to become permitted.