

Too-successful pit-beef cart moves again, as councilman drafts use-it-or-lose-it bill for food cart licensees

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Baltimore City councilmember William H. Cole IV plans to introduce legislation to require those with city food cart licenses to use them within six months. Meanwhile, the popular cart that inspired the bill is trying yet another location to appease a hotel that complains the cart's \$5 grilled beef and lamb sandwiches are taking business away from their \$10.95-per-burger sit-down restaurant.

The reaction to Cole's bill from Vassos Yiannouris, whose wife Maria Kaimakis operates the cart? It's a lot like the explosive sizzle when Maria drops some marinated lamb on the 700-degree grill.

"I would say to him: 'You're not a vendor, you don't know how hard it is to be out there selling in the hot sun and the rain for hours,'" Yiannouris began, fuming.

Cole's bill isn't aimed at settling [this particular turf battle](#), between the sidewalk sandwich-selling-couple and the Marriott-owned Residence Inn. But Cole says it could prevent similar problems in the future. How?

The spot where restaurateurs Kaimakis and Yiannouris have been peddling pit beef recently — the corner of Light and Redwood streets — is the same one where the couple operated a wildly successful chicken souvlaki and falafel cart in the early 1990s. They stopped using the cart in 1993 when they established Cypriana restaurant, currently located at 17 Light Street, but over the years they have kept their license current by paying the annual fees. The big 15-floor extended-stay hotel did not exist back in the 1990s, but it was open for business in July, when Kaimakis revived the cart operation to appeal to recession-rocked downtown eaters.

"The (hotel) manager was shocked," Cole said.

"People shouldn't be able to sit on a license that long, it locks out others who might want to use it," he said, in a telephone interview. Worse, it could hurt any restaurant that pops up in that location in the interim, said Cole, who argues that a bricks-and-mortar food service business should be favored over a small cart.

"When somebody spends millions to build a hotel or business, we've got to save whoever made that investment," he said. That idea galls Yiannouris.

"I think, for the guy with the small cart, it's a big investment too!" he said. "I risk my savings, my kids' college with this business."

Asked a question that Cole poses – ‘How would you feel if somebody opened up a cart next to Cypriana?’ – Yiannouris paused a second and then said, it might not be a problem: “it might generate more business” for him.

“At one time, there was one department store, then two and three together in a mall with a food court and it helps everyone there to be in the same place,” he said. “Carts on the street make some life, some excitement downtown.”

Cole says he has nothing against carts (and hopes a compromise is reached in the Cypriana case) but notes that carts can, occasionally be a nuisance. He recalled how hot dog carts around the entertainment area at Market Place (the Power Plant Live! development, etc.) were at one point recently becoming “magnets for the severely drunk” and had to be shut down by police and relocated.

Staying licensed to sell from a mobile cart isn’t cheap. Along with the city’s \$375 annual license for food carts, there are [licenses required](#) by the Baltimore City Health Department and the state of Maryland Department of Licensing. Currently, the city licenses 55 downtown food cart vendors, according to Beverly Deaton, of the Miscellaneous Tax and License Unit of the Baltimore City Bureau of Revenue Collections. Deaton said her office forwards applications to the Vendor Licensing Board for approval.

Yiannouris says he has sought to be accommodating since the Residence Inn complained and that he and Kaimakis tried a location across Redwood Street in a parking lot. It was a bust, he said: business after a few days was down 50 percent. He attributes the problem to the configuration of the lot.

“The cart only opens on one side and to face the sidewalk we had to have it facing south, so the hot sun was beating on everybody and nobody wanted to come,” Yiannouris said. “It was a depressing spot.”

Now the Vendor Licensing Board has asked them to try a spot across Light Street, near the Municipal Employees Credit Union Inc. (MECU) building, he said.

“We’ll see what happens for a few days, I will continue to try to be flexible,” Yiannouris said. “But if it doesn’t work out, I’m going right back to where we were!”