

Restaurant Safety

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City News Service

SANTA ANA (CNS) - Orange County supervisors postponed a decision today on whether to change the way restaurants post food safety signs.

The board, on a 3-1 vote -- with Supervisor Chris Norby opposed and Supervisor Janet Nguyen abstaining -- asked staff for more information and delayed a decision for a week.

while supervisors put off a final decision, the board appears to be leaning toward a tweak of the current system instead of switching to a new one using color-coded cards.

Richard Sanchez, of the Environmental Division of the county's Health Care Agency, outlined that proposed system, which would use the traffic colors of green, yellow and red.

It would provide food safety information "at a glance," Sanchez contended.

Under the color-code system, a green sign with the word "pass" indicates the restaurant passed its inspection, a yellow saying "conditional pass" would indicate some problems were found and a re-inspection is necessary and the red sign includes the word "closed."

The county currently uses a seal that tells diners whether an eatery is in inspection compliance or whether re-inspection is needed.

A disadvantage, Sanchez said, is the differences are not readily visible at a glance, a thought echoed by Supervisor Janet Nguyen, who said, "I don't see a difference at a glance."

She later recused herself from the discussion saying she may have a conflict of interest with the issue.

The current system requires restaurants to have reports on their latest inspection available for patrons to request.

Supervisor Bill Campbell commented that he had never asked a restaurant to produce an inspection record, adding that he doubted many people did.

Inspection reports are also available online, and the county has an incentive program of conferring Awards of Excellence on restaurants that consistently exhibit excellent food safety and sanitation practices, according to a staff report.

About 2,200 restaurants, or 17 percent of the 13,000 eligible food facilities in the county meet that criteria, according to the latest report.

The issue of restaurant notification came up after the 2007-08 Orange County grand jury released the report, "Restaurant Inspections -- What No One is Telling You," and recommended that the county go with a letter system like Los Angeles County.

An advantage of the letter system is quick notification to patrons, but it uses a point system that takes many factors into consideration, such as having rust on the bottom of a machine, Campbell pointed out.

Campbell, who has been in the food service industry for 25 years, said that rust may count against a restaurant as much as improper food temperatures.

"Which is more dangerous?" he asked.

Switching to a color code system could cost the county about \$500,000 and it would also raise inspection fees to restaurants by about 2.8 percent, Sanchez said.

"I'd hate to see a point-based rating system," said Mike Learakos, the 30-year owner of Katella Grill in Orange.

Even the age of the building would be taken into account in that system, he said, insisting that Orange County has the best notification model.

And, Learakos said, now is "not a good time to absorb a fee increase."

Sanchez said that a restaurant posted with a yellow sign would be reinspected in two weeks, or sooner if requested.

Supervisor Pat Bates questioned the fairness of leaving a restaurant with a yellow sign for two weeks, if corrections are quickly made.

"At a glance, the perception is going to be (one of) caution," Bates said, "Is that fair if they've corrected it?"

It's unfair if inspectors cannot get back for another look in a timely manner, Bates said. Nor does it enhance the county's responsibly to help businesses and

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protect the public, Bates added.

"I'm concerned that yellow is sending a confusing message to the public in terms of what this is," Bates said, asking if yellow means a restaurant is safe to eat in or not.

"We do consider it is safe to eat at, even with the yellow," Sanchez said.

But Bates responded, "I don't know if we hit it and are on the mark."

Norby said he would have no problem in tweaking the current seal system to make it more clear, but insisted that Los Angeles County, with its letter system, is no safer from food-borne illness than Orange County.

"If it's not broke, don't fix it," he said.

Bates said staff recommended a July 1 implementation if the board adopts the new systems, but questioned if that is enough time to educate the public.

Supervisor Chair John Moorlach said word he has gotten from the public is "we really want something to tell us immediately whether to go into a restaurant."

"There's something the public is demanding to go above and beyond the current system," Moorlach said. But he was not in favor of using points, as in Los Angeles County, that can be more of a "gotcha" relationship between eatery owners and inspectors as opposed to one based on education.

The supervisors asked staff to return with more information, including how to change the current system to make it clearer to diners.