

Public Comment

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L.A. may soon crack down on park vendors

Proposed regulations would require permits for selling

BY EMILY ALPERT REYES
AND SOUMYA KARLAMANGLA

Los Angeles leaders could soon impose tight restrictions on vending in city parks and beaches, reviving a highly controversial issue that divides police, community residents and immigration advocates.

People hawking ice cream, holding yoga classes or selling other goods and services can get permission with the parks department to ply their trade, but there is no effective way to punish them if they don't, parks and police officials told a City Council committee Monday.

The commercial activity has di-

vided Angelenos who see the business buzzing in parks as a dangerous nuisance — or part of a vibrant metropolis.

An earlier set of rules was suspended nearly nine years ago as the city grappled with two lawsuits over vending on the Venice Beach boardwalk. City lawyers are now seeking to reinstate a revised version of the rules, designed to fall in line with court rulings meant to preserve freedom of speech. A panel of city lawmakers narrowly voted Monday — 3 to 2 — to send the rules on to the full council for approval.

The proposed restrictions would bar vending in public parks unless sellers have a city license or permit to

do so. They would also permit someone to sell things that he or she has written or created, such as books or recordings, or “expressive items” such as bumper stickers or newspapers.

At the Monday meeting, people living near Silver Lake Meadow complained about exercise classes blasting music. In Echo Park, some residents are clamoring for the restrictions, arguing that pushcarts and flea-market-style sales are sully the freshly remade park around Echo Park Lake.

The lack of enforcement “invites a lot of other illegal activity,” said Linda Arroz, a writer who moved to [See Vending, AA6]

Vendors in L.A. parks come under debate

[Vending, from AA1] the Angelino Heights neighborhood last summer. If vendors are regulated, "at least then we know what they're selling."

But others warm at the sight of the little carts circling the lake. After all the change that has come to the area, "it's like a piece of the heart of Echo Park is still here," said 23-year-old Cecilia Romero, who sat Monday afternoon alongside the lake with her twin sister Beah. Neither sister thought that vending hurt the community they grew up in.

City officials warned lawmakers that without the restrictions, Los Angeles could be on the hook if a child takes a tumble during an unlicensed pony ride, or someone falls ill from eating unsanitary food from a cart. Councilman Mitch O'Farrell, who backed the proposed rules, called it "a gaping hole in the liability ... that the city faces every time a park is open."

Police said they are unable to stop dangerous, unlicensed vending without reviving the rules. "Our hands are basically handcuffed," said LAPD senior lead officer Victor Gutierrez.

At the Lotus Festival at Echo Park Lake, unapproved vendors set up shop next to sellers who had paid fees of roughly \$1,000 a day to take part, undercutting their prices, said Kevin Regan, assistant general manager of the parks department. Around Hansen Dam,



LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

ICE CREAM vendors pause to talk near Echo Park Lake. L.A. officials say tighter restrictions on vending in parks are necessary to protect the city from liability, but others say the regulations could hurt poor residents.

someone has been regularly offering pony rides and "he knows we can't stop him," Regan added.

But others worry the restrictions could punish poor residents who sell ice cream or tamales to get by. "You're generally going to see a single mother ... that earns about \$12,000 a year. And those are the kinds of people

that are going to suffer from this," said Mike Dennis of the East Los Angeles Community Corp., which urges legalized street vending.

Under the proposed rules, repeat offenders could face a misdemeanor — a punishment that some councilmen thought far too stiff for the crime. Joseph Villela, director of policy and

advocacy for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, warned that the plan could undercut the strides made by police to build trust with immigrants and jeopardize citizenship for many.

"We are in fact putting people in peril," said Councilman Gil Cedillo, who questioned the parks de-

partment on whether it had done enough to reach out to immigrants and explain the permitting process. If the rules pass, he argued, people could be "deported and kept out of this country, separated from their families, simply because of the act of selling ice cream."

Cedillo and Councilman Curren Price voted against

the plan, after Price pushed unsuccessfully to soften the maximum offense to an infraction. The proposed crackdown comes as Price and other council members are promoting a separate plan to legalize street vending across the city, allowing wares to be sold on streets and sidewalks.

Champions of street vending argue that different rules for vending in parks and on the street would be confusing. But backers of the plan argue that parks deserve different rules — a protected space that shouldn't become "a public bazaar or flea market," said Councilman Tom LaBonge.

City attorneys and other officials added that the existing rules — or lack of them — are already inconsistent. In MacArthur Park, food trucks could get slapped with citations for illegal vending on the sidewalk, but are able to drive into the park and avoid citations, said LAPD senior lead officer Iris Santin.

The council committee decided to remove an "urgency clause" from the proposed rules to allow more time to inform the public about the changes but rejected other changes proposed by Price.

"We cannot afford to water down this ordinance," Councilman Joe Buscaino said.

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