Advice for Culinary Entrepreneurs: Achieving Reality for Your Restaurant Vision

Starting a new food business such as a bar or restaurant fulfills a life-long goal for many people, but it can also be very stressful. There are many questions you may be asking yourself: Will my customers like what I have to offer? Is this a good location? Will my business be successful? What regulations do I need to follow? No matter if your dream is a trendy farm to table restaurant, a hot dog cart at the Courthouse, or a food truck serving comfort food, the Peoria City/County Health Department is here to help navigate the food safety waters of opening a new food establishment. With approximately 120 entrepreneurs submitting plans for food establishments each year in Peoria County; here are some tips learned along the way to make the food licensure process as easy as possible:

- **Contact the Peoria City/County Health Department early in the process.** Not sure what kind of sinks are needed in a commercial kitchen, what kind of training you and your staff will need, or what exactly a grease trap is? We routinely answer questions over the phone or email about the Illinois Department of Health Food Code and Peoria County Code regulations. Just want to talk about an idea you have for your business but aren’t sure what the next steps are? Give us a call and we can discuss your plans and what we will need from you. Additionally, we can also do a consultation at a location you are thinking about purchasing or renting to advise you on what will need to be done to meet code requirements. This may help with the budgeting process for your new business as some equipment and the installation can cost more than what you expect.

- **Attend a City of Peoria One Stop meeting.** Uncertain if your plans meet City codes or Zoning requirements? Have questions about building permits? One Stop is an informational meeting for anyone looking to start a project in Peoria. Representatives from several departments are available for questions such as Building Safety, Planning and Zoning, Public Works, Fire, Economic Development, Health Department, and some utility companies. One Stop is held every Monday at 1:30pm on the 4th floor of City Hall. You do not need an appointment and can just stop on by!
• **Design your space with the flow of food in mind.** The best advice on food establishment design is this—follow the flow of food. You should consider how a menu item will travel through your kitchen from the time it is received until it is served to a customer. Do you have enough storage space? Room to prep the food? Where will vegetables be washed? What cooking equipment and ventilation is needed? Are there enough handwashing sinks close enough to food and ware washing areas? Is there enough cold and hot holding for the menu items? A good equipment layout and plan review now helps avoid problems in the future.

A special note on hand washing sinks—Often, not enough consideration is given to the placement of hand washing sinks. The food code gives the requirement that hand washing sinks be convenient and accessible to all employees at all times and the “correct” placement of sinks varies greatly based on the menu, equipment layout, flow of food, and number of employees working at once. If an employee has to walk a distance or has barriers between themselves and the sink it can turn a 20-second process into a two-minute endeavor which may leave your customers waiting longer for their food. Or worse… the employee may not take the time to wash their hands at all, leaving your customers vulnerable to foodborne illness transmission.

• **Submit plans for approval ASAP.** Once your location, equipment design, and menu are finalized, submit a completed Plan Review Application packet to the Health Department for review. It is important to submit plans prior to any remodel or construction, just in case revisions are needed. It is much easier to move a sink on paper than relocate it after it has already been installed. One of the biggest mistakes owners make is waiting until the last minute to submit plans which can delay licensure and scheduled opening dates. The time frame from submittal of completed plans to actual licensure can take a minimum of one month, so advanced planning is important. Your plans are kept on file for a year or longer, if needed, after they have been approved. After plans are approved and construction is completed, a final inspection can be scheduled to grant approval to operate.

If you are thinking about opening a food establishment, the Peoria City/County Health Department can help you with the process. Contacting the appropriate regulatory authorities first, using smart design principles, and submitting plans early in the process will help make the licensure process as smooth as possible. A properly planned and constructed space helps set the foundation for safe and sanitary food service for years to come.

Visit the Peoria City/County Health Department website at [www.pcchd.org](http://www.pcchd.org) for a copy of the Plan Review Application, Step-By-Step guidelines for opening a new food establishment, and other important Public Health information.

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The Peoria City/County Health Department, nationally accredited, continues efforts to improve community health in Peoria County with the overarching goal **“to increase the number of people who are healthy at every stage of life.”**