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Health inspection info may be posted

By Peter Felsenfeld
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Contra Costa supervisors may soon require restaurants to make their latest health inspection reports more easily accessible to the public.

Interest surfaced last month after the Times reported that county health officials are struggling to visit each restaurant, bar and food market at least once a year.

Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond said he will ask Environmental Health leaders to report on the feasibility of assigning letter grades to restaurants.

The article, he said, added urgency to an issue he's considered for several years.

"It's important for the public to know the health conditions of restaurants."

Staffing shortages are forcing inspectors to respond to complaints and disease outbreaks rather than make routine preventive visits, the Times reported Jan. 17. That prompted a flood of calls from concerned readers.

"My wife and I eat out every weekend," said San Pablo resident Paul Brodsky. "There's got to be a way for us to know about the safety of where we're eating."

California restaurants must provide their health reports upon request. Some California counties take additional steps, such as requiring posted letter grades. That may be appropriate in Contra Costa, said Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho of Discovery Bay.

"A grade would give restaurateurs an incentive to keep up their safety standards."

However, she said, any system should not strain the county's general fund.

That hasn't been a problem in Los Angeles County, which instituted letter grades in 1998, said Jonathan Fielding, that county's Environmental Health director. Inspection fees cover the additional costs, he said.

Los Angeles County inspectors make unannounced visits based on risk and post the resulting grades immediately. Businesses that appeal their marks receive two surprise visits in the following 12 months.

Food-related hospitalizations have sharply declined in his county, Fielding said. Restaurant

closures also declined.

"The policy has been a great success," he said.

San Francisco supervisors last year tried to require letter grades. But fierce opposition from the powerful Golden Gate Restaurant Association stopped them, said Supervisor Chris Daly, who introduced the legislation.

As a compromise, the board voted to post inspection reports online and to award stars to restaurants with clean records. The policy will take effect this spring, Daly said.

Contra Costa's Environmental Health Department inspects all restaurants in the unincorporated county. Grade posting would require supervisors' approval. City councils would have to OK the policy for restaurants in their jurisdiction.

Such a move could directly affect Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier of Concord, who owns a restaurant. DeSaulnier declined to comment, other than to say he would recuse himself from any restaurant-related board discussions.

Eating out has become a more common feature of family life, said Supervisor Gayle Uilkema of Lafayette. So the time could be right to re-evaluate health reporting, she said.

The Times reported persistent staffing shortages Environmental Health leaders have faced over the past two years. Department and union officials attribute the problem to Contra Costa's inspector pay, which lags behind most other Bay Area counties.

The \$74,000 mid-level inspector salary and accompanying benefits sounded pretty good to some readers. The article generated more than 40 inquiries about employment, most from people without the requisite undergraduate degree, said Environmental Health director Ken Stuart.

One came from Richmond resident Melissa Morgan, a secretary for an Oakland environmental engineering firm. Inspecting restaurants, Morgan said, could offer a way to contribute to the community and work in her home county. She has not heard back from the department.

"I'm a nit-picky person," she said. "I'd like to help people pay attention to their food safety."

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