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Grades for food safety

Placards will reveal eateries' compliance with health mandates

By Jason Green

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Color-coded placards will soon hang in Santa Clara County's 8,000-plus food service establishments, providing diners insight into whether the fare being served has been prepared safely.

The Board of Supervisors

has unanimously approved a proposal that will require restaurants to reveal whether they've passed inspection by the county's Department of Environmental Health.

"There's a clear public health imperative here," said Supervisor Joe Simitian, who came up with the proposal.

Restaurants with no more than one major violation will receive a "pass" or green placard while those with two or more will receive a "conditional

NEW PLACARDS
Green: A "pass" no more than one major violation
Yellow: "Conditional pass," two or more violations
Red: "Fail," if violations are not corrected within three days or the county closes the restaurant

Establishments will be scored on a 100-point scale to indicate their overall compliance with food safety regulations. Detailed inspection results and scores will be posted on the Department of Environmental Health website.

Placard

Environmental Health website.

Simitian said the new system is intended to help residents make more informed choices and ultimately improve food safety.

“Right now, the system we’ve got essentially rewards people who do just barely enough to get by their inspection and treats them precisely the same as the folks who are doing an outstanding job,” said Simitian, adding that awards will be handed out to those who excel.

Simitian called food-borne illness a “significant public health issue.” He pointed to an estimate by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that 48 million Americans, or one in roughly six, are sickened every year. Of that number, 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die.

“This really is a significant public health issue,” he said. “This is not simply a question of trying to provide more information, although that’s an important part of the effort, I think.”

At Tuesday’s meeting, a handful of speakers, including Kevin McClelland of the Cupertino Chamber of

Commerce, raised concerns that the new system would actually mislead restaurant patrons.

McClelland offered one example where two food service establishments receive green placards but different scores. He said the one with the higher grade could have been docked for one major viola-

“If you’re red, you’re closed,” he said. “If you’re green, you’re doing OK. And if you’re yellow, people get to know that you’ve had significant problems in the recent past, and they might want to pause for a moment.”

The system will be introduced as part of regularly scheduled inspections,

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— *Supervisor Joe Simitian*

tion, whereas the one with the lower grade could have been docked for a few minor violations.

“There is an issue and concern around the online scoring that has the unintended consequence of being misleading to consumers,” McClelland said. “For a consumer to think that the 92 restaurant is somehow better and operating safer than the 88 is misleading.”

Simitian admitted that he would choose the restaurant with the higher score but defended the system as straightforward.

county staff said.

The full cost of implementation likely won’t be known until fiscal year 2016, according to a report by Amy Brown, the county’s director of agriculture and environmental management. Food service establishments could end up paying an additional annual fee of \$100.

In a related move, the board approved the creation of two environmental health specialist positions, which are expected to cost a total of \$306,005 in fiscal year 2015, the report said.

MILPITAS POST

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EDITORIAL

A major new consumer protection initiative for diners

“Whether you are grabbing a quick lunch or settling in for a fancy dinner, you want to know that the food was prepared in a kitchen that is clean and safe.” That’s how county Supervisor Joe Simitian summarized his push for a major countywide system that will eventually rate every one of the 8,000 dining places in the county and later all food trucks and caterers.

It will require posting in the front a placard with a red, yellow or green color and also put online the complete results of most recent inspections along with any past violations.

This significant public health program launched over the past year by the county’s Department of Environmental Health has been tested, vetted and analyzed at workshops along with a huge number of public comments. There are also on-going class sessions for restaurant operators and their staffs. And now it is ready for a rollout.

A variation of this program has been working for several years in many other jurisdictions including Sacramento, San Diego, Alameda and Los Angeles counties but our county has carefully tweaked it to fit locally. And it appears to have the support of the dining industry, according to DEH Consumer Protection Director Mike Balliett.

The three principal grades that will apply is the green card, which can be earned with a perfect inspection or nothing

worse than one serious violation which was corrected immediately. The yellow placard denotes that two such violations have taken place. A red card, with a trio of serious flaws, will shut the restaurant down until corrections take place.

Why is this important?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that nationally 76 million cases of food-borne illnesses occur annually causing 5,000 deaths and 325,000 hospitalizations.

The [website at sccgov.org/SCCDineOut](http://sccgov.org/SCCDineOut) will provide the food facility inspection results and also list the restaurants that have been shut down for food safety violations over the past six months.

The county’s 38 inspectors will begin using the placard and website system as they complete their regular inspections here in Milpitas and all the other cities. So the visual impact will be gradual although it will be sending important signals to all the other food service operations. In addition to restaurants, the new regulatory system covers markets, bakeries, liquor stores, bars, farmers’ markets, food services at fairs and festivals, ice cream and hot dog carts, food trucks, produce trucks and food vending machines.

The educational effort will provide classes in various languages, reviews of new facilities and remodelings, and will issue permits. Classes are also held to qualify food operators and managers for state food safety certification.

We think both the public and the food industry will be well served by the new system and in particular here where we have such a broad diversity of food serving practices and cuisines.