

From: Silvia Rodriguez <veganchefsil@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, February 24, 2026 3:49:01 PM
To: Public Testimony <PublicTestimony@newhavenct.gov>
Cc: Alder Caroline Tanbee Smith <carolineward9nhv@gmail.com>
Subject: Best City to Start

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to offer my testimony in support of Alder Carolin's "Best City to Start" initiative and to share my experiences as a small business owner navigating the City of New Haven's licensing and regulatory environment.

I began my business in 2021, operating as a chef hosting pop-up kitchen events at various establishments throughout New Haven. From the outset, I encountered significant challenges that many small businesses, particularly those started without substantial financial backing; continue to face.

One of the most immediate barriers was the cost of entry. The initial startup and licensing fees for a small food business in New Haven are extraordinarily high. Because there was no specific license category for pop-up chefs at the time, my business was placed under the "catering" classification, which required me to pay nearly \$600 in licensing fees alone. This expense was in addition to commissary kitchen fees, state licensing costs, taxes, and other regulatory requirements, effectively placing my business in a financial deficit before earning any profit.

As my business progressed, I ultimately discontinued holding a City of New Haven license due largely to ongoing challenges with the Health Department. The licensing process was marked by inconsistent guidance and conflicting information. Depending on whom I spoke with, I received different interpretations of requirements and compliance expectations. This lack of consistency created confusion, delays, and additional costs, making it extremely difficult to operate with confidence or stability. These issues ultimately prevented me from continuing regular business operations within the city.

Although I continued to participate sporadically as a vendor over the years, I fully ceased operations in New Haven in 2024, due to continued licensing difficulties and ongoing inconsistencies with the Health Department. In May 2024, I participated in a Night Market event, during which I again encountered issues related to licensing fees and communication with the Health Department. These repeated challenges reinforced the barriers that small food-based businesses face when attempting to operate within the city.

High upfront licensing fees significantly hinder the growth and sustainability of small businesses. For many entrepreneurs, investing nearly \$600 at the beginning of their journey leaves little capital to reinvest into operations, equipment, marketing, or staffing. Many of us are building our businesses from the ground up, without access to wealth, outside funding, or family financial support; and relying solely on hard work and determination. In Connecticut, food businesses often depend heavily on vendor events for income, yet these events also carry high participation fees, making it increasingly difficult to remain profitable.

New Haven is home to many aspiring entrepreneurs who simply want the opportunity to test their ideas and determine whether their businesses are viable. Excessive fees and inconsistent regulatory enforcement deter individuals from starting altogether and have directly hindered my own business. At present, I do not hold a license in New Haven and have seriously considered closing my business entirely. Unfortunately, the cumulative burden of fees at both the city and state levels has made it nearly impossible to operate profitably or sustain a livable income.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my experience and strongly support initiatives that aim to reduce barriers, create consistency, and foster a more accessible and supportive environment for small business owners in New Haven.

Respectfully,

Chef Sil 