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EASTERN SHORE NEWS

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SATURDAY, AUGUST 31, 2019 ■ TASLEY, VA

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An exterior view of Woody's Beach BBQ in Chincoteague.

Food trucks surge on Chincoteague

Dealing with regulations still a struggle for owners

Lucas Gonzalez Salisbury Daily Times | USA TODAY NETWORK – DELMARVA

Tucked away far to the east of Virginia, the quaint town of Chincoteague is a popular summer destination for vacationers from across the nation.

Although it is primarily known for its wild ponies, the small island community has also captured people's attention with its evolving food scene.

For a town with nearly 3,000 residents, one might expect to find only a handful of dining options in Chincoteague.

However, it has more than 20 restaurants, and, over time, it has also become a haven for food trucks.

The town now accommodates more than a dozen food trucks and counting, offering barbecued foods, subs, pizza, desserts, ethnic cuisine and more.

Customer reception to the food trucks has been largely positive. There's even a Facebook group, Chincoteague Island Foodies, in which people discuss their favorite trucks and other eats on the island.

"I've been a huge supporter of them from the beginning. Love that we have more food options and variety," wrote Janet Roberts Trader.

Despite the food trucks' popularity, owners say the town's wastewater treatment issues and regulations have been problematic for them. The town, though, says it's looking to update its practices.

Larry Parsons, owner of Woody's Beach BBQ — one of the first food trucks in Chincoteague — said he feels regulations have been inconsistent.

"It's like trying to play a game and the rules keep changing," Parsons said.



Customers wait in line at Lily's Little Mexico in Chincoteague.

PHOTOS BY LUCAS GONZALEZ/SALISBURY DAILY TIMES

Why are there so many food trucks?

The growth in the number of food trucks in Chincoteague is due in part to the town's lack of a central wastewater system.

Anyone who wants to open a new brick and mortar restaurant in town would be responsible for installing and maintaining their own septic system, and that can be extremely costly, according to Jon Richardson, environmental health manager with the Eastern Shore Health Dis-

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A dog eyes some dog treats on the refreshment table after a dedication ceremony at the new dog park on Chincoteague. CAROL VAUGHN/SALISBURY DAILY TIMES

Chincoteague dedicates new dog park

Everybody is enjoying it, especially the dogs, says mayor

Carol Vaughn Salisbury Daily Times
USA TODAY NETWORK – DELMARVA

Chincoteague's new dog park on Hallie Whealton Smith Drive has been dedicated.

The ceremony Monday included remarks by Mayor J. Arthur Leonard and a blessing of the canines given by Father Michael Imperial of St. Andrew Catholic Church.

The idea of creating a dog park on Chincoteague surfaced several years ago, but it took time, fundraising, an expert's analysis — and lots of discussion by officials and residents, including about where to put it

and what regulations should apply.

"We worked on it and worked on it and worked on it. We never thought it was going to come to fruition," Leonard said.

"There were some people that said we would never have a dog park. We do have a dog park, thank the Lord — and it looks like everybody is enjoying it, especially the dogs," he said.

A "Wagapalooza" fundraiser in February 2017 helped raise money for the project.

"We are the only dog park in Accomack County," said Donna Leonard, a Chincoteague resident who played a leading role in the push to build a dog park in the town.

Leonard said she was excited to see the park ded-

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Food trucks

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tract, which is comprised of the Northhampton and Accomack county health departments.

“Sewage systems now for a restaurant on Chincoteague ... they’re on the magnitude of tens of thousands (of dollars), if not six figures,” Richardson said.

Food trucks have different regulations. Since they’re considered mobile units, they are not required to have sewage systems. Instead, each food truck has a built-in holding tank which accommodates any waste it generates.

“It’s much cheaper, generally speaking,” Richardson said.

Trouble for food trucks

Parsons said in the early food truck days on the island, there weren’t established practices because they were a new concept.

“We kind of made the rules up as we went along,” Parsons said.

One of his main concerns is that large wastewater tanks are prohibited.

Parsons said food trucks once used tanks that held up to 400 gallons, which allowed them to spend less time and money on pumping out wastewater.

Now, trucks have to use their mobile units’ built-in tanks, which hold about 30 to 40 gallons. That means they need to be pumped out several times a day, Parsons said, adding that it’s “almost impossible to operate under those circumstances.”

Food trucks have the option of installing a septic system which is pumped out by sewage haulers as needed, but Parsons said some owners might not be able to afford that.

Health department regulations never permitted the larger tanks, but officials asked business owners to stop using them once they found out it was going on, according to Richardson.

“Some of these tanks that folks were using, they’re plastic tanks. We have no idea: Are they meant to be in direct sunlight? Can they crack easily?” Richardson said.

Additionally, Parsons said food trucks now are not allowed to have porta-potties, and there are no public restrooms close to Maddox Boulevard — the main hub for food trucks on the island, an issue for customers.

There are restaurants close by, but Parsons said many only let paying customers use their restrooms.

Lily Velazquez, owner of Lily’s Little Mexico food truck, said her employees and customers have no other choice but to use the restroom elsewhere.

Velazquez said she doesn’t feel the lack of on-site restrooms has affected her business, but she’s concerned that people have to travel so far just to use the restroom.

“It is heartbreaking,” Velazquez said.

Virginia state regulations give local health districts the authority to decide



Customers sit and dine at Woody’s Beach BBQ. PHOTOS BY LUCAS GONZALEZ/SALISBURY DAILY TIMES



Larry Parsons, owner of Woody’s Beach BBQ, points at the location where a restroom used to sit behind his business.

whether to allow porta-potties on a case-by-case basis, according to Richardson.

Yet they can’t compel anyone to clean and fix the porta-potties or provide a handwashing station. There have also been issues with porta-potties blowing over, even when they’re anchored down.

“I don’t want people eating and using the bathroom if they can’t wash their hands. I don’t want folks to show up to a porta-potty if it’s been abused and not taken care of. Most business owners would not let that happen, but I can’t say that all would,” Richardson said.

Potential solutions

Richardson said he’d like to see the town build public restrooms closer to Maddox Boulevard, possibly in the centrally located Chamber of Commerce building.

The town recently received a \$1 million multimodal transportation grant, which it plans to use in part to build public restrooms on Maddox Boulevard. It’s not yet clear exactly when and where they could arrive, according to Chincoteague Mayor Arthur Leonard.

Additionally, Leonard said Chincoteague and other towns on Virginia’s

Eastern Shore might soon be able to hook up to a central sewer in Onancock.

Discussions are in place with the Hampton Roads Sanitation District to run a line from Onancock all the way down the spine of the Eastern Shore, according to Leonard.

There are a few different alternatives being considered for Chincoteague, one of which would involve water desalination.

The town has a deep well which it could use as a source of water. In that case, it might be able to use existing transmission lines to treat the water, according to Leonard.

“There are a lot of things in play, and nothing is certain yet; it’s a lot of ‘what-ifs.’ Nothing is going to get done overnight,” Leonard said. “It’s going to be a long, long process, but you’ve got to start that ball rolling somewhere.”

In the meantime, Richardson said food trucks have the option to apply for a permanent pumping and hauling permit, which he said is about a few thousand dollars — significantly less expensive than installing their own wastewater system.

“The challenge on Chincoteague is that most of the island is very, very low,” Robinson said. “There’s very little setback, if any, to the groundwater table, and that’s what makes the cost so much higher for that particular area.”

Parsons said he’s shocked by the town’s lack of public septic, considering the number of people it attracts with its wild ponies and NASA Wallops Flight Facility.

Ultimately, he’d like to see officials have a better understanding of food truck owners’ perspective.

“We’re trying to just make a living,” Parsons said.

Follow reporter Lucas Gonzalez on Twitter @fzj_rl.

Park

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icated.

The area next to the Island Nature Trail on Hallie Whealton Smith Drive finally was approved as the location, after other spots on the island, including Veterans Memorial Park and Donald Leonard Park, were considered and rejected.

Access to the park is limited to pass holders — annual or weekly passes can be purchased at the town office at 6150 Community Drive during business hours and at the Chincoteague Police Department after hours.

The dog park is open from dawn to dusk.

The annual permit is \$35 for the first dog and \$5 for each additional dog belonging to the owner. The permits run through April 15, 2020. Weekly permits cost \$15 for the first dog and \$5 for each additional dog.

Call the town office at 757-336-6519 with questions.

On Twitter @cvvaughnESN
443-260-3314



Father Michael Imperial of St. Andrew the Apostle Catholic Church blesses the dogs at the new dog park on Chincoteague. PHOTOS BY CAROL VAUGHN/SALISBURY DAILY TIMES



LEFT: Dogs play at the Chincoteague Dog Park.

RIGHT: Abbey, a rescue dog, enjoys the new dog park in Chincoteague, Virginia with her owner Bob Shendock.

