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Brentwood leaders lower rental rate for city's commercial kitchen

By Paula King

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BRENTWOOD -- When the Brentwood Community Center opened in early 2012, city officials had high hopes that local entrepreneurs would use its certified commercial kitchen -- equipped with two convection ovens, an oven with a griddle, a six-burner range and small appliances -- to make their food products.

Surprisingly, only four local entrepreneurs have used the 700-square-foot commercial kitchen in more than two years, and there are no upcoming rentals planned.

Local food business owners say the city's facility rents for a higher rate than others in the area, and that those heftier fees would eat away most of their profits. Last week, the City Council voted to lower the kitchen's rate to a universal \$20 per hour to hopefully boost usage. Previously, hourly rates ranged between \$46 and \$65 depending on the day of the week.

"We are trying to encourage some opportunity for some people where the cost barrier may be too high to take on that risk," Councilman Erick Stonebarger said. "(The commercial kitchen) was really designed to allow some type of experience to happen and create value from nothing."

City leaders have said the kitchen can help small, local companies who produce baked goods, jams, jellies, sauces, soups and other food items to kick start or expand their businesses at a reasonable cost. For years, area farmers have been searching for commercial kitchens to make food items from excess crops.

"Lowering the cost to rent a commercial kitchen would be great," said Brentwood resident Christina Bell, who bakes cakes and cupcakes through her home-based business, Confections by Bella. "It would also encourage groups to use the kitchen."

According to Bell, using the commercial kitchen at its past hourly rates would force her to charge \$200 per cake with materials, labor and licensing fees included. She noted that it would be too high for some of the basic cakes that she creates.

"I can't sell a cake for that cost," Bell said.

Oakley resident Melissa Mitchell, of Mey's Marvels, said it wouldn't work for her business because it takes her more than one day to make a batch of her signature decorated cookies.

"It depends on what they are making and how long that process takes," she said of the ability for entrepreneurs to use a commercial kitchen.

Mitchell added that lower rates would allow more business owners to increase their volume and build their businesses beyond direct sales. She noted that many of these businesses are owned by moms who are busy juggling kids and work, so they don't necessarily want to grow.

For more than a year, cottage food operators such as Bell and Mitchell have been allowed to legally prepare food items in their home kitchens and sell them to the public under California's Homemade Food Act. According to Brentwood Vice Mayor Joel Bryant, this lower rental rate would help these operations to cut costs and leave behind the "distractions and challenges" of cooking at home, including children and pets.

"This is a great opportunity for the cottage food industry to take advantage of one of the finest kitchens available," Bryant said. "With these prices, it would be difficult to match the power consumption alone."

The new rate will be in effect for six months as a pilot program. In addition to the lower hourly rate, the city is cutting the deposit from \$300 to \$200 and waiving the application fee, but merchants still must obtain liability insurance and state or county permits.

There are 30 food companies in East County, according to Brentwood Economic Development Manager Alex Greenwood.

"Local food businesses have become a key part of our economy," he said. "We are very excited to offer this kitchen at a special low rate to help support our local food entrepreneurs."

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TO LEARN MORE

To reserve the Brentwood Community Center's commercial kitchen or inquire about the new rates, contact Helena Pfeifer at 925-516-5444 or Pfeifer@brentwoodca.gov.