

# Los Angeles Stages a Fast Food Intervention

By KIM SEVERSON  
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A NEW weapon in the battle against [obesity](#) was rolled out last month when the Los Angeles City Council decided to stop new fast food restaurants from opening in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.



David McNew/Getty Images

**FROZEN OUT** No fast food businesses may open for a year in South Los Angeles, where obesity and a dearth of food markets are concerns.

### Multimedia

Back Story With The Times's Kim Severson (mp3)  
6:46



Stephani Dani for The New York Times

**CHOICES** Jan Perry, a councilwoman in Los Angeles, said the fast food moratorium may give residents healthier options.

The moratorium's definition of a fast food business is any stand-alone restaurant that dispenses food, to stay or to go, and that has "a limited menu, items prepared in advance or prepared or heated quickly, no table orders, and food served in disposable wrapping or containers." It is up to the city's director of planning to decide which places fit that definition.

That could keep out people like Sue Moore, who sells a high-quality hot dog from cattle raised on pasture, served with fresh grilled onions on top. She was invited to park her Let's Be Frank truck at the premiere of "Star Wars: The Clone Wars" this week at the Egyptian Theater in Hollywood.

Even in a country where a third of the schoolchildren are overweight or obese, the yearlong moratorium raises questions about when eating one style of food stops being a personal choice and becomes a public health concern.

The Sisyphean struggle against poor diets has included booting soda from schools, banning [trans fat](#) and, more recently, sending New Yorkers into dietary sticker shock with a law that requires calorie counts be posted on menus, right next to the prices.

But this appears to be the first time a government has prohibited a specific style of restaurant for health, rather than aesthetic, reasons.

Jonathan Gold, the LA Weekly food critic who won a [Pulitzer Prize](#) last year, said he understands the spirit of the freeze, which is an urban planning measure meant to keep the neighborhood, South Los Angeles, from being swallowed up by drive-though fast food restaurants. (A separate measure by the city provides economic incentives for new grocery stores and restaurants with table service.)

Fast food chains, he said, are like [jellyfish](#) in the ocean: with too many in one area, nothing else can thrive.

But he worries that the law could keep out places of more culinary interest. South Los Angeles has the best barbecue in the city, he said, and it has a growing number of cooks from Mexico and Central America making lamb barbacoa and pupusas. "Anytime you try to ban something, there's a lot of bycatch," he said.

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She and her partner, Larry Bain, who runs two hot dog carts in San Francisco, say that there's nothing wrong with fast food if it's made with good ingredients. They worry that their dogs will be shunned along with dogs made from lesser ingredients.

"Our policy makers abhor nuance and the subtle but distinct qualities that differentiate fast food from food that can be served fast," said Mr. Bain.

The councilwoman behind the moratorium, Jan Perry, says its intent is not to crush food choices, but to encourage variety and give residents more nutritious options. Making healthy decisions about food is difficult when people have small incomes, the grocery store is five miles away and a \$1 cheeseburger is right around the corner, she and supporters of the ban say.

The moratorium doesn't mean that people who live within the affected 32-square-mile zone will be cut off from the pleasures of an inexpensive cheeseburger and hot fries. More than 45 percent of the 900 restaurants there — the highest concentration in the city — are fast food chains.

The idea is to bring new eating options to the city's food deserts, the term now in vogue to describe poor neighborhoods whose residents have few places to buy fresh groceries.

"People do not understand what happens in a disenfranchised community," said Councilwoman Perry, who represents neighborhoods in the area. "The fact remains, there are not a lot of food choices in South L.A."

Since there is not much land left to develop in the area, the moratorium will allow city planners time to determine what kinds of businesses would be best in an area where rates of obesity and diseases related to it are disproportionately high.

"Anybody who believes fast food is the source of all dietary evil is, of course, being naïve," she said. Other facets of modern life contribute to obesity. People drive more than they walk. Children play video games more often than stickball. And daily life has become saturated with opportunities to eat.

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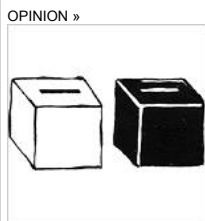


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