

Written testimony from:

Jennifer Bird

From Food Truck to Brick and Mortar:

When COVID-19 hit our communities in the spring of 2020 our food truck, Taco Truck All Stars, was bracing for the worst, and hoping for the best. In early March one by one our entire season of events was canceled. Food truck businesses after all are based on social gatherings/events in order to be successful. While we were not surprised, we knew we had to make changes and adapt to this new era of pandemic caution and safety and seek out opportunities that we would never have been able to do otherwise during our "normal" food truck season. Just like so many other small food service/event based businesses the future of the food truck, which was about to enter our 9th year, was facing uncertainty.

In early spring 2020 Miles Hooper of Ayers Brook Goat Dairy reached out to us to explore the possibility of setting up 3 days a week in a beautiful spot on Route 66. In exchange for setting up on his land Miles was looking for someone to purchase goat meat from his company Vermont Chevron LLC, also very much affected by the pandemic as restaurants he normally supplied with his locally raised goat were shut down. We jumped on this opportunity to try to save the food truck while offering the community something unique and supporting a great local farm. For safety and financial reasons we did not hire employees as we were self isolating together to keep not only ourselves safe, but to also ensure the safety of our customers and the community. We put into place contactless ordering and pick-up and required our customers to wear masks on site at all times.

As the summer season progressed we gained a very loyal, and supportive following in the Randolph community. Many of our customers who we saw weekly wanted to know how long we would be serving on the hill and if we had considered moving into a brick and mortar location downtown, expressing that the community was in need of more food options, specifically Mexican. Despite this strong local following we were nowhere near where we normally would be financially if our season had not been so affected by the pandemic, so the thought of opening a brick and mortar seemed quite risky.

About a month and a half prior to finishing up service on Route 66 we were approached by a local landlord to see if we might be interested in a restaurant space soon becoming available. This was never in the cards or part of my future plans. We had been making the 2 hour round trip commute from South Burlington to Randolph since spring and taking the leap to set up a brick and mortar was a whole new life chapter. To open a restaurant during a pandemic, and also heading into a time of year where restaurant business slows significantly seemed on the surface to be quite a risk to say the least. Despite these concerns we still needed to figure out how we would make it through the winter months following the financially strained food truck season. Because of the financial hit we had taken with a significantly slower season and not having events lined up through the coming winter months we needed to figure out a way to keep going and sustain hoping that next spring (2021) the state would be in better shape handling the pandemic so we could salvage some sort of 2021 food truck season. There were many signs which led us to the decision to secure a brick and mortar, first basic necessity for work, but also our customers and the support we were shown by the tight knit local community. We saw long term potential in the local economy, what the benefit of becoming a part of it could be, not only the benefits to the local economy, but also the potential to be able to support more local farmers as well.

So we took what little savings we had and took the leap to bring Tacocat Cantina to Randolph. Our plan was to open for take-out only with a strict safety protocol in place offering contactless take-out and continue that way until the pandemic was more under control and we felt confident that we could safely provide the community with a more full service restaurant. This meant we would not hire any outside employees to limit the amount of exposure to others, again in order to keep ourselves and our customers safe. This was and continues to be our number one priority. It seemed to be quite a large undertaking that myself (owner) and my Chef (owner of Taco Truck All Stars) would pull this off not only with no physical help but also without additional financial support, but we needed a plan for the winter months. We were basically moving our food truck operations indoors but at the same time adding significant overhead costs that one incurs when operating a brick and mortar- security deposit, rent, utilities, new equipment, start-up costs, etc. We were able to secure small amount of assistance through a crowdfunding campaign that covered a fraction of our start up costs. Because I was opening the business in 2020 I was aware that I was not eligible for state pandemic relief aid/grants.

The first 2 months of operation myself and my chef did not take a paycheck from the business to make sure it was financially stable enough to endure. We kept our start-up costs as low as possible. Because we were not opening full service we have been able to slowly purchase equipment and inventory as the weeks progressed after opening, which kept the initial financial investment lower. Our local community support has continued to be strong after opening on November 6, 2020. I am confident that Tacocat Cantina has already and will continue to enriched the local economy. We have a long way to go and need to financially invest significantly more in the business before we can set the restaurant up as full service. Once the pandemic is nearing its end we look forward to really seeing the restaurant be able to live up to its potential, to be able to employ local residents, and purchase more of our products locally. Being eligible for relief grants would ensure our long term success in Randolph and therefore significantly enrich Vermont's local economy.

Jennifer Bird  
Owner/Operator  
Tacocat Cantina LLC  
21 Merchants Row  
Randolph, VT 05060