
Letter from COOK Alliance regarding MEHKOs (Item 11)

From Lauren Wolfer

Date Fri 9/11/2026 4:57 PM

To PublicComment-AutoResponse <correspondence@cityofpasadena.net>

 1 attachment (305 KB)

COOK Alliance Letter to Pasadena City Council re_ Home Kitchen Permitting (MEHKO) Program.pdf;

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Good Afternoon,

I hope this message finds you well. I've attached a letter from COOK Alliance as public comment for Agenda Item 11 at the September 15 City Council meeting.

COOK Alliance is a statewide nonprofit with extensive experience supporting the development and implementation of Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operation (MEHKO) programs across California. Our letter shares relevant research and experience from jurisdictions throughout the state as the City considers establishing a MEHKO pilot program in Pasadena.

Please enter this letter into the public record. I've blind copied Mayor Gordo and Council on this email for their reference. If any Councilmembers or staff have questions before Tuesday's meeting, I'm available over the weekend and can be reached directly at

Thank you for your help with this!

Warm regards,
Lauren



Lauren Wolfer
Policy Director
cookalliance.org

she/her

09/15/2026
ITEM 11



September 11, 2026

Re: Support for a Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operation Program in Pasadena

Dear Mayor Gordo and Members of City Council,

I am writing on behalf of COOK Alliance, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting home-based food entrepreneurs, to urge the City of Pasadena to move forward with a Microenterprise Home Kitchen Operation (MEHKO) pilot program.

We frequently hear from Pasadena residents who want to start a permitted home-based food business, only to learn that they cannot because they live within Pasadena's city limits. MEHKO permits are already available in communities served by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Long Beach, which like Pasadena operates its own local health department, has also established a program. This leaves Pasadena as a regional outlier and puts its aspiring culinary entrepreneurs at a disadvantage based solely on where they live.

Starting a food business is a dream for many people, but the cost of renting commercial kitchen space or opening a restaurant puts that dream out of reach for many aspiring entrepreneurs. Faced with these barriers, some people give up entirely, while others sell food informally without the safeguards and support that come with a legal permit pathway. The MEHKO permit was created to address this challenge. It gives residents an accessible and affordable way to legally prepare and sell home-cooked meals while meeting food safety requirements through permitting, inspections, and food safety training.

The demand for home-cooked food already exists in Pasadena. A MEHKO program would not introduce a new activity or food safety risk. It would bring existing informal businesses into a clear regulatory framework, with permitting, food safety requirements, and oversight from the Pasadena Public Health Department.

Importantly, residents are not asking the City to create another social service program. MEHKOs represent a small-scale economic development opportunity that allows residents to generate income, contribute to their local economy, and build greater economic self-sufficiency through small business ownership. Research evaluating the program statewide found strong economic outcomes, including that approximately one third of operators used the permit as a stepping stone into larger food businesses such as catering companies, food trucks, and brick-and-mortar restaurants.

Importantly, the MEHKO program is not new or untested. Every California jurisdiction that has reached the end of a temporary MEHKO pilot has chosen to make the program

permanent. Most recently, Contra Costa County made its two-year pilot permanent after receiving just two minor complaints during the pilot, with no foodborne illness complaints or other public health incidents. County officials acknowledged that many of the concerns raised before the program launched “simply have not shown up.” They also reported that most permitted operators are women and people of color, demonstrating the program’s success in expanding access to entrepreneurship.

These local experiences are supported by The Home-Kitchen Pathway, the first comprehensive statewide evaluation of California’s MEHKO program. COOK Alliance and CAMEO Network partnered with a researcher from the University of Washington’s Evans School of Public Policy & Governance and the independent research firm EMC Research to examine the program’s first five years. The study included permitting and complaint records from participating jurisdictions throughout California, as well as surveys and focus groups with operators and consumers.

Among the 898 MEHKOs permitted between 2019 and 2024, 97% received no formal complaints of any kind, including complaints related to food safety, traffic, parking, noise, or other neighborhood concerns. Environmental health agencies identified only two foodborne illness complaints statewide, neither of which could be verified. The research also found strong public support, with nine in ten Californians surveyed supporting a system for legal, permitted home kitchen businesses.

The program has also produced meaningful economic benefits. Seventy-three percent of operators reported that their MEHKO provides meaningful financial support for their household, and 76% of operators said their MEHKO helps them meet family or caregiving responsibilities while earning income. Nearly 70% of MEHKO operators are women, and many are parents or caregivers who need a flexible way to earn income.

We recognize that launching a MEHKO program will require staff time and appreciate PPHD’s thoughtful planning for implementation. At the same time, we respectfully encourage the City Council and PPHD to explore opportunities to reduce the estimated startup costs by drawing on existing resources and the experience of other jurisdictions.

Pasadena would not be building this program from scratch. The California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health (CCDEH) maintains existing MEHKO guidance and resources for local health departments. Numerous jurisdictions have also developed application forms, educational materials, inspection procedures, staff training resources, and data collection practices that Pasadena would be able to adapt. COOK Alliance would be happy to connect PPHD with experienced departments, share resources, and support community outreach and technical assistance.

Based on our experience working with MEHKO programs across California, a dedicated General Fund allocation of this size for startup and implementation is not typical. To our knowledge, neither Los Angeles County nor the City of Long Beach required General Fund support to launch its program. We encourage the City to examine how those jurisdictions incorporated MEHKOs into their existing food permitting and inspection systems and whether a similar approach could reduce Pasadena’s projected costs.

We also encourage the City to distinguish expenses created by the pilot from work PPHD already performs. PPHD has existing experience permitting and inspecting home kitchens through the Class B Cottage Food Operation program, as well as responding to complaints regarding unpermitted home-based food operations. The MEHKO program would build on functions and expertise already present within the department.

Establishing a legal permit pathway may also reduce enforcement burdens by encouraging more operators to enter the regulated system voluntarily. Los Angeles County has reported that its program encouraged more operators to participate in the permitting process, improving food safety oversight while reducing the need to rely solely on enforcement.

The experience of other pilot jurisdictions gives Pasadena a clear roadmap for implementing the program successfully. We respectfully urge the City Council to approve an accessible and affordable MEHKO pilot so Pasadena can join communities across Los Angeles County and throughout California in supporting safe, legal home-based food businesses.

Thank you for your consideration and leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lauren', with a stylized, flowing script.

Lauren Wolfer
Policy Director
COOK Alliance

Agenda Item 11 - Home Kitchen Operations

From Paul Little

Date Mon 9/14/2026 11:59 AM

To PublicComment-AutoResponse <correspondence@cityofpasadena.net>

Cc Rivas, Jessica <jerivas@cityofpasadena.net>; Madison, Steve <smadison@cityofpasadena.net>; Masuda, Gene <gmasuda@cityofpasadena.net>; Lyon, Jason <jlyon@cityofpasadena.net>; rcole@cityofpasadena.net <rcole@cityofpasadena.net>; Gordo, Victor <vgordo@cityofpasadena.net>; Hampton, Tyron <thampton@cityofpasadena.net>; Jones, Justin <justinjones@cityofpasadena.net>; Rick Cole <urbanistcole@gmail.com>; Hawkesworth, Matthew <mhawkesworth@cityofpasadena.net>; Carmona, Manuel <mcarmona@cityofpasadena.net>

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Hello Mayor Gordo and City Council Members,

The Board of Directors of the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce appreciates the efforts by the City of Pasadena to encourage entrepreneurship and is generally supportive of the pilot program to allow a small number of home-based kitchens to operate as restaurants in their home.

We also understand that our local restaurants are struggling with high costs and reduced spending by consumers.

With that in mind, we would ask that there be absolute parity in fees and inspections between our small restaurants and any home-based kitchen restaurant. Business license fees should be calculated the same way, for example. Health inspection costs should also be calculated at the same rate as any of our existing small restaurants. Inspections should include not just the kitchen, but the entire living space, again, similar to restaurant inspections. The home-based kitchen restaurants should also be required to carry the same insurances, including worker's comp, liability and other coverages as existing restaurants. It is likely these home kitchen restaurants will be cash businesses in many cases. How will you be sure sales tax is collected and paid as required? Will these home-based kitchen restaurants be required to dispose of food waste in the same way existing restaurants do?

Essentially, as these home-based kitchen restaurants will be operating in the same community and competing with existing businesses, they should not have built-in advantages over existing restaurants.

Again, we understand and appreciate the support for entrepreneurs in our community. We just want to be sure they are not unfair competition for our existing food businesses. We also hope these operators do so in a clean, sanitary and healthy way, so as not to endanger their customers or the public.

Thank you for your service to Pasadena and your constituents.

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All the best,

Paul

Paul Little

Paul Little
President and Chief Executive Officer
Pasadena Chamber of Commerce and Civic Association
44 North Mentor Avenue
Pasadena, CA 91106

[<http://www.pasadena-chamber.org>%20]www.pasadena-chamber.org

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City Could Launch Two-Year Home-Restaurant Pilot Program

From galekohl@aol.com

Date Mon 9/14/2026 1:42 PM

To PublicComment-AutoResponse <correspondence@cityofpasadena.net>

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Good afternoon,

I'm writing to you to ask you to truly consider what a home restaurant program means for our existing brick and mortar restaurants that exist in Pasadena.

I'm the first one that will say that we need to extend opportunities to all that want to work and expand their horizons. I have serious thoughts on why the 2 year Home Restaurant program could become a serious issue if we do not analyze the pros and cons

First, there are not enough inspectors in Pasadena to accommodate this many permits. The permit is supposed to be based on paying for a minimum of two inspections per year and associated paper work. As it is, the city has a difficult time just complying with twice a year.

Why would home kitchens not be subject to 2 inspections a year like the brick and mortar restaurants? Would the inspectors also need to inspect the entire house and other areas that might produce unsafe food or working environments? These are the things that our health department looks at when making inspections at brick and mortar restaurants.

Also, the restaurants in Pasadena are run by people who have education in food safety and proper handling procedures. This is not something that can be learned by taking an online course and being certified. Who knows if the person applying for the permit is really the person taking the certification course?

There are so many questions and procedures that need to be examined before we make a decision that has such huge implications.

Thanks for listening! I'm happy to speak to any or all of you about this.

Respectfully,
Gale Kohl
Gale's Restaurant

09/15/2026
ITEM 11

Microenterprise Home Kitchen operation

From

Date Mon 9/14/2026 3:01 PM

To PublicComment-AutoResponse <correspondence@cityofpasadena.net>

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I am writing to voice my concerns with the program being considered. As the owner of a brick and mortar restaurant in the city all I want is a level playing field for all food service businesses.

1. Will the establishment be required to have an ADA bathroom?
2. Any person involved in the operation should be required to have the necessary food safety certification, not just the employees. This would include all family members associated with the business.
3. Since there is a maximum dollar threshold will the city require submission of BOE sales tax returns to insure compliance.
4. All health inspections should include the entire interior of the facility to insure no rodent infestation.
5. Why only one annual inspection when brick and mortar have two?

Lastly but more from my personal perspective as a restaurant owner in the city for over fifty years, I wish there was the same concern from the council over costs for existing businesses. This year utility rates are up 20%, minimum wage just went up, the city is promoting a parcel tax on the November ballot which will raise costs for everyone. I just lost almost all my street parking. When is enough enough?

Michael Osborn

Owner

Pie'N Burger

913 E. California Blvd.

Pasadena

Sent from my iPhone