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Street Vendors Fight Proposed Restriction of 3 to a Block *City Council To Hold Hearing Today on Overhaul of Regulations*

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A bill that would overhaul the city's street-vending regulations will receive its second hearing at the City Council today, amid objections from store owners who say it would restrict retail privileges and vending associations that say it would impede First Amendment rights.

Introduced last month by Council Member Philip Reed, a Democrat of Manhattan, the proposed law would amend vending regulations and increase the number of vending licenses issued by the city.

"Right now, the rules are different in every borough. You have different agencies overseeing different parts of the vending regulations. It is very complicated, difficult to enforce, and often abused," Mr. Reed said.

The law would restrict vendors to three a block, and each vendor would receive a priority number to resolve disputes over certain retail locales. It also would open up most of the city's streets and avenues to vending, increase the number of licensed vendors

from 853 to 2,000 by the year 2007, and eliminate working papers as a requirement for obtaining a vending license — a deregulation that would enable undocumented immigrants to receive vending licenses.

Mr. Reed has argued that the changes will help clear up sidewalks and facilitate enforcement by providing clear and comprehensive regulations.

"No one likes the rules as they are on the books right now," he said. "Problems are addressed by laying one law on top of another. It needs to be fair, enforceable, and understandable."

Opponents of the bill, however, have called the reforms "ludicrous" and said they will not protect vendors' rights, but rather restrict them further.

"What is interesting about this bill is that it has inspired opposition from every stakeholder possible," a spokesman for the Neighborhood Retail Alliance, Richard Lipsky, said.

Many vendors oppose the bill as restrictive and likely to cause chaos among competitors for highly trafficked blocks.

Under the bill, on one block, one food vendor, one general-merchandise vendor, and one "First Amendment" vendor — someone selling paintings, books, newspapers, or any other material of original content — would be permitted.

"Just imagine how many fights and arguments the police are going to have to break up a day," the president of the Artists' Response to Illegal State Tactics, Robert Lederman, said. "The idea of making more vendors to solve the problem of having too many vendors makes no sense to me."

The law would also require the First Amendment vendors to obtain licenses, a measure that has been denounced by some civil-rights groups.

"The right for artists to create, display, and sell their work on the street is a matter of free speech," Mr. Lederman said.

Small-business owners, too, have objected, saying the increased number of licensed vendors would steer business away from "mom and pop" establishments that are already struggling to meet higher real-estate costs.