

Quick action vowed on food-safety issue

City proposes more inspections, new code

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The Kansas City Star

Kansas City Health Department Director Rex Archer promised Thursday to have a new food safety code and recommendations for higher restaurant permit fees to the City Council by the end of the month.

Money from higher fees would be used to hire more inspectors and raise salaries. The new food code would replace current regulations, which are based on 25-year-old federal standards.

Voters would have to approve any fee increase. The City Council could place the proposal on the ballot as early as June, City Manager Bob Collins said.

The proposed changes came in response to an investigation by *The Kansas City Star* and a city audit issued Wednesday that found glaring deficiencies in the city's food protection program.



REX ARCHER/Health Department Director

"I did not raise this issue effectively enough to the council," Archer told city officials Thursday.

Hundreds of restaurants, supermarkets, convenience stores and other retail food establishments have gone a year or longer without an inspection, the reports found. The city's food regulations also lack

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many modern standards for preventing the spread of food-borne illnesses. Archer was harshly rebuked for the inspection backlog at a Council business session on Thursday.

"It seems to me to be something of such magnitude that we should have known about it (earlier)," said Councilman Troy Nash. "We have become the butt of jokes... people not wanting to eat in Kansas City."

Councilman Jim Rowland suggested that Archer should have inspected restaurants.

"It's unacceptable for any reason whatsoever not to have done the inspections," Rowland said. "You need to be held accountable, because you did not do the job... Our citizens were put at risk."

"I take responsibility," Archer said. "I did not raise this issue effectively enough to the council."

Mayor Kay Barnes pressed Archer for a speedy solution.

The Health Department's food protection program has been hampered by difficulty in hiring inspectors and by the inspectors' overwhelming workload. The department is budgeted for eight inspectors to cover about 2,700 food establishments. Six of the positions are filled.

"We have about half the staff we need," Archer told the City Council.

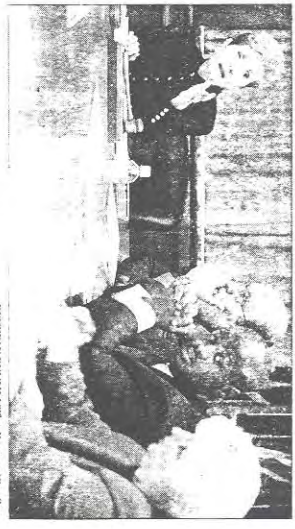
Archer has proposed increasing the number of inspectors to 14 and paying them more. Kansas City's starting pay for inspectors, \$23,712, is among the lowest in the metropolitan area.

Archer said he is working out a pay increase for inspectors with the city's Human Resources Department. The Human Resources Department has suggested raises averaging 21 percent.

The most likely source of money for raises and more inspectors is higher permit fees for restaurants and other food establishments. The fees now range from \$100 to \$175 for restaurants and \$75 to \$375 for grocery stores.

Archer said these fees could double or triple to raise enough money.

"We can't go to doubling staff without another funding source," Archer said after the meeting. Barnes told Archer to report back to the council later this month with a



REX ARCHER/Health Department Director

The food safety code was on the agenda Thursday as Mayor Kay Barnes and Kansas City Council members, including (from right) Becky Nace, Terry Riley and Charles Eddy, met in a business session.

Because food safety standards based on a model issued in 1999 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Council must approve the code before it goes into effect.

change frequently, Archer said he would ask the Council for authority to incorporate updates into the code.