Prince George’s County Council  
1401 McCormick Dr.  
Largo, MD 20774

November 26, 2012

Dear Councilmembers:

We strongly support the use of posted letter grades for food service facilities, and look forward to their implementation in Prince George’s County. At the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a nonprofit health advocacy organization, we have for over 40 years represented consumers on food safety and nutrition issues to promote a healthy population. We accept no government or industry funding, and we publish the Nutrition Action Healthletter, the world’s largest-circulation nutrition newsletter.

Restaurant customers have a right to expect that the food they eat will not harm them. Yet customers have no way to control what goes on in restaurant kitchens. They depend on restaurants to follow safe standards of food handling, and on local inspection agencies to enforce those standards. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 48 million Americans get sick and 3,000 die from foodborne hazards each year in the United States.¹ According to CSPI’s database of more than 7,000 foodborne illness outbreaks spanning over 20 years, 52.9% of all illness outbreaks caused by food in Maryland can be traced to restaurants.² Maryland residents have been sickened by Salmonella, Clostridium, and Norovirus, among others. Restaurant food-borne illness outbreaks affect a larger number of people than those in private households because the volume of food prepared in restaurants and the number of people involved in food preparation are greater. The impact of cross-contamination, improper handling, and poor hygiene in restaurants are thus increased.

The bill being introduced here today seeks to provide consumers with critical information that can help them protect their health. Consumers want to dine out with their families, and the restaurant and retail industries certainly want them to do so. But outbreaks and sanitation violations linked to popular restaurants make consumers understandably wary. These incidents clearly can adversely affect consumer confidence. This bill takes an important step to reverse this, by assuring consumers that they have the information they need to make safer restaurant choices for their families.

The sanitary grade system being considered here has been successfully implemented elsewhere. Consumers in Los Angeles County, CA have been selecting restaurants based on posted grades for over ten years, and over 90% of consumers surveyed say that they like the program. Consumer approval of the grade card system has provided a benefit for restaurateurs as well. A 2003 study found that Los Angeles restaurants with an “A” grade saw an average increase in revenue of 5.7% following the inception of the program.³ “B” grade restaurants saw increased revenue of 0.7%.⁴ Further, the restaurant grading system implemented in LA County has corresponded with a 20% decrease in the number of people admitted to hospitals with food-related illnesses, showing that is an effective public health program.⁵

Not only do consumers deserve access to the important inspection information, they have expressed a strong desire to have it. In a national survey conducted by CSPI, 85 percent of respondents said that knowing the results of a restaurant’s most recent health inspection would affect their decision of whether to dine at that...
In addition, 84 percent supported a city or state law that would require restaurants to post their most recent inspection grade in the front window of the establishment.\(^{vi}\)

Unfortunately, consumer access to inspection results varies widely. Right now, consumers in Prince George’s County have no access to inspection results, unless they fill out forms at the health department requesting information about a specific establishment. This obviously presents a severe burden on consumers and decreases the likelihood of anyone actually using the information to make a dining decision. Although the county is purportedly considering an online database, such are also inefficient and insufficient, because they require consumers to select and research a dining destination in advance. This is simply impractical for consumers who are making their dining decisions on foot during lunch hours or while walking or driving through popular neighborhoods for dining. Further, even a cursory search of online records requires consumers to analyze complex inspection data, and, if necessary, continue searching record after record until finding a satisfactory restaurant. By this time, a consumer is probably frustrated—and famished.

Unless restaurants are content to offer all the information consumers use to make a dining decision—including Zagat ratings, framed restaurant reviews, and other window advertising—online only, we see no reason why important public health information should be relegated to the Internet. Notably, only 1 in four consumers surveyed in 2007 said that an online inspection report is the most useful way of providing inspection results to the public.\(^{viii}\)

Inspection information therefore needs to be available in its most convenient and recognizable format—A, B, or C—in the window of each establishment. Sanitary inspection grading gives consumers this important health information at the moment they choose a place to dine, with proven public health benefits.

As Prince George’s County grows as a retail and restaurant destination for consumers, we urge the Council to make the County a leader in protecting public health as well.

Sincerely,

Sarah Klein
Senior Staff Attorney, Food Safety Program

---


\(^2\) Center for Science in the Public Interest, *Outbreak Alert!* (Revised and updated – 2012).


\(^4\) Id. “C” restaurants saw a 1 percent decrease in revenue.


\(^7\) Id.

\(^8\) Id.