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Ky. Voices: UK Dining serving all well; no need for a private vendor

By Isabel Cochran

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Gregg Rentfrow, left, and Ryan Chaplin stuffed and cut sausage in the University of Kentucky meats lab in February. HERALD-LEADER |[Buy Photo](#)



The University of Kentucky Dining Revitalization Committee is making a decision soon on privatizing UK Dining Services.

The deadline for possible contractors to respond to the recently released request for proposal, or RFP, is Thursday.

After the bids are in, a decision will follow on whether a private company or the existing dining services will be the future of UK dining.

The names of the companies that have submitted bids remain undisclosed, but we can speculate. Aramark, Compass and Sodexo are the largest and most likely candidates. Each has recent histories of breaking contracts and committing civil-rights and public-health violations.

In 2009, Aramark's food-service quality was so bad that Kentucky prisoners rioted against it. These riots prompted a state audit that found that Aramark overbilled the state by \$130,000 a year.

Workers are constantly suing Compass for racial and sexual violations; so are organizations including the United Nations for fraud and bribery.

Sodexo is involved in one of the most startling scandals: the detection of horse DNA in beef products earlier this year. Here in Lexington, we like our horses out on rolling green hills, not under our forks.

The RFP may have requirements about sourcing local food and supporting Kentucky farmers, but how will such stipulations be enforced? UK officials have stated that just one person would be employed to make sure the contract is followed. This is an impossible task considering the size of the university and the track record of these companies.

Even if all requirements were upheld, there would still be flaws. Those concerned with the future of dining employees have been reassured by UK officials that workers will keep their jobs.

Although this may be true, the majority of them will no longer be employed by the university, but by the private vendor. The RFP requires that only full-time workers put on the payroll before Feb. 13 will remain UK employees.

All part-time and student workers, as well as newly hired full-time workers, will be managed by the private vendor. University benefits and wages are almost guaranteed to be significantly better than those of a private vendor.

Another major flaw is the loss of a unique and excellent service that is already in place. The phrase dining "revitalization" is almost an insult to this service. UK Dining isn't dead and doesn't need revitalization.

It's quite the opposite, living brightly and growing every year. How can a multinational company adequately replace the deeply rooted relationship UK Dining has with students, farmers and employees?

It has partnered with multiple departments of the university, including the College of Agriculture. Some of the food served on campus is grown by students. Practices like these are important to upholding UK's commitment to its standing as a land-grant institution and should not be put at risk.

So if UK's current dining is so good and all these potential third parties are so bad, why outsource?

With the ongoing expansion and reconstruction of housing on campus, the same is necessary for dining facilities. Unfortunately, this means high start-up costs for construction. A third-party contractor is being requested to supply the capital for all new facilities. Although the university does have the funds to complete this in-house, they are pursuing other sources in order to spend that money on different projects.

This is understandable, but it's not a worthwhile reason to sign a contract with an out-of-state corporation. Current UK dining is very profitable and eventually could pay off the debt undertaken in building new facilities. Revenue has doubled over the past 10 years, making it the highest revenue-generating sector in student affairs.

There are many concerns regarding this issue, and thankfully there are opportunities for them to be expressed. The next of these is an open forum on Wednesday, from 5 to 7 p.m. in Worsham Theatre of the UK Student Center. Hopefully, all those concerned will show up and speak out, as this is the last public forum before the bids are evaluated and a decision is made.

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