

Dining In

“Tech cities” like San Francisco have not experienced the kind of widely-shared economic growth that would be expected, given the presence of large tech companies like Facebook, Airbnb, Twitter, and Google. One partial explanation of this is that many of these tech workers interact less with the local economies than is expected. For example, instead of eating at local restaurants and cafes, employees in these large firms often get their meals from in-house dining facilities. The situation has led some San Francisco legislators to support a policy that would ban the construction of any new on-site workplace cafeterias. Similar policies have been implemented in nearby municipalities.¹

Supporters of these policies point to the large tax breaks that many of these companies were given as incentives to move to or expand in these cities. These tax benefits were given on the assumption that these large companies would help to stimulate the local economy. By making it more likely that these employees (many of whom are well-paid) will eat out in the surrounding community, public officials hope that these new policies will help spread around the wealth generated by these tech giants. Aside from its economic aims, this proposal has social objectives as well. With private shuttles, in-firm dining, and apps like Amazon almost entirely eliminating the need for tech workers to set foot outside at all, this policy also hopes to force previously isolated tech workers to interact with the rest of San Francisco society, at least during lunchtime. In the words of one of its authors, “people will have to go out and eat lunch with the rest of us”.²

Unsurprisingly, this proposal has met plenty of opposition. Critics point out that restaurants and cafes are but one segment of the economy. Despite what the policies’ authors’ claim, the “isolated” tech worker lifestyle does not represent a total failure of these tech giants to deliver economic stimulus; instead, this lifestyle has simply led to the creation of cafeteria, delivery, and transport jobs instead of restaurant jobs. Other critics see this as an instance of heavy-handed interference with the free market—these critics argue that legislators have no business ordering people to interact nor deciding where people should spend their lunch money.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is the policy discussed in this case an ethical means to achieve its goals? Why or why not?
2. Is there any moral reason that firms should “share the wealth” with local communities in the specific way that local communities desire?
3. What (if any) moral reasons do people have to integrate themselves into local communities?

¹ <https://www.sacbee.com/news/state/california/article215493815.html>

² <http://www.sfexaminer.com/supervisors-move-ban-workplace-cafeterias/>

