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Let's Gut Rudy's Fulton Fish Market Plan

My mother always said that fish was brain food, but it doesn't take too much brain power to realize that City Hall - which manages to lose money with the Off-Track Betting Corporation - will ruin the Fulton Fish Market if it tries to overregulate it.

Although Mayor Rudy Giuliani wants to shrink government and encourage small businesses, his proposed regulations for the market will undoubtedly expand government bureaucracy and hurt the independent entrepreneurs that drive the city's seafood industry.

The Fulton Fish Market is invisible to most people. It comes to life at midnight, when most New Yorkers are asleep, and it closes down when most offices open their doors for business. Located downtown in a bunch of old buildings on the East River, the market consists of about 60 wholesalers, 700 retail stores, and 100-plus purveyors who prepare and distribute fish to restaurants and stores throughout the region.

Although the market is the nation's largest, selling about \$1 billion worth of fish each year, it has lost business over the decades. Supermarket chains have begun buying directly from fishing fleets and shippers; frozen fillets from overseas have replaced fresh fish in many eating establishments; and airline deregulation has allowed other cities, such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, to get fish flown in directly.

Fulton Fish Market thrives because there is a huge market in this city and region for fresh seafood not the frozen fillets served in other parts of the country. Each day Fulton Market wholesalers contact suppliers from Nova Scotia to the Caribbean in order to stock New York's upscale restaurants and feed the city's residents who still believe that fish is good for your health or I.Q.

The Giuliani Administration argues that organized crime has driven business away from the Fulton Fish Market, and City Councilman Ken Fisher is promoting legislation that would require all individuals loading and unloading trucks at the market to be fingerprinted and investigated before they are hired.

The mayor wisely wants to generate more revenue. The wholesalers have admittedly benefited from the city's incompetent management of the waterfront. They pay rents as low as \$5 per square foot, but Giuliani's proposal to triple the rent and charge wholesalers a registration fee of \$25,000 is a threat to the industry itself. Excessive rent hikes may drive legitimate wholesalers to Yonkers or the Brooklyn piers controlled by the Port Authority. Restaurateurs and retailers would be less likely to make either of those trips; soon we could all be reduced to eating canned tuna.

The same municipal government that can barely regulate taxis, that can't afford after-school youth programs and can't do enough to please the pardoned felon who owns the Yankees, now wants to control one of the most fragile links in the city's food chain. This is a new approach to reinventing government: Add to the city's budgetary woes and destroy jobs in the name of reducing crime.

Clearly, the market is sitting on waterfront property that could yield more money for the city treasury, but what would the city put there in its place? Another antiseptic shopping mall where suburbanites feel at home? A bunch of fast-food outlets dispensing frozen fish sticks? Or, maybe a historic replica of the Fulton Fish Market before it moved out of Manhattan with its 1,000 working-class jobs?

Only the City Council can save the mayor from his own prosecutorial instincts. Let's hope that not everyone in City Hall was raised on meat and potatoes.

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