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Fundraiser food now safe from health inspectors

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It began as a typical fundraiser for the Friends of Willistead - a folksy annual affair complete with friendly volunteers, freshly made sandwiches and a healthy dose of homespun charm.

It ended in a splash of bleach, a heap of spoiled egg salad and a lot of angry questions about why Ontario's public health inspectors seem to be reading the Health Protection and Promotion Act as if it's the riot act.

Art in the Park is an annual luncheon in Windsor, hosted by a group of women to raise money for the restoration of Willistead Manor, a lavish mansion built in 1906 for Edward Walker, son of the whiskey tycoon.

The ladies were preparing the food in the kitchen when the inspectors arrived and promptly declared them in violation of the act's food premises regulation because the eggs had been cooked off-site, said Brenda Clayton, the group's president.

First, they confiscated the sandwiches. Then they threw them in the trash. And for good measure, they doused them in bleach. "There was a meanness there - it was not nice at all," Clayton said. "Everybody was very upset by the whole incident. It ruined our day."

The ladies had been boiling the eggs at home and then assembling the sandwiches on site for at least 20 years without any trouble from public health authorities, said Clayton. So why did the inspectors choose last weekend to break up the party?

Ontario Health Minister George Smitherman called the bleach incident "inappropriate and offensive," and admitted the province's 36 public health units have become overzealous in applying the regulation.

Under the current law, farmers' markets, church suppers and other service club fundraisers are lumped together with grocery stores and restaurants, and inspectors have been holding them all to the same standard, Smitherman said.

"That obviously doesn't mesh with our common sense view of what a farmer's market ought to be."

Robert Chorney, executive director of Farmers' Markets Ontario, described the problem as "36 health units interpreting the rules 36 different ways."

Things nearly boiled over last year when about 200 protesters - one vendor had been fined \$125 for mislabelling a jar of pickles - showed up outside health unit offices in Brockville to complain of harassment.

Wary of a political hot potato, the government set up a task force to study the issue.

As a result, farmers' markets, church suppers and service club fundraisers will be exempt from the regulation as of today, though they must post a warning the event hasn't been inspected.