

## \$1.8m in arrears

Breakfast Shed food vendors shutting down

**PORT OF SPAIN**

■ Melissa Maynard

[melissa.maynard@trinidadexpress.com](mailto:melissa.maynard@trinidadexpress.com)

FOOD vendors at the Breakfast Shed (Femmes du Chalet) on the waterfront in downtown Port of Spain are shutting down their operations and moving out after decades of providing local dishes to thousands of customers.

Vendors who provide food out of about a dozen concrete kitchen stalls were recently issued a demand letter for rent arrears, which collectively amount to nearly \$2 million, Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago (UDeCOTT) chairman Shankar Bidaisee confirmed yesterday.

At the food court yesterday, closure of the Breakfast Shed was evident as some operators were packing up and another was serving its final meal. Bidaisee said he was not immediately aware of vendors vacating the premises, but promised a site visit today.

He disclosed that vendors collectively owed approximately \$1.8 million in arrears and 'a demand letter has been sent'.

'The tenants, they are owing UDeCOTT a substantial amount of money and, of course, UDeCOTT has been making demands for payment... that's arrears over several years,' he said in a telephone interview.

According to Bidaisee, instructions were given to recover the outstanding debts because 'that is a debt to the State'.

He said steps were taken to write to tenants about the outstanding rent owed, saying, 'We do send our monthly invoices.' Bidaisee said he would look into the matter to provide clarity.

### Empty stalls

The *Express* spoke with one vendor serving a final menu to a handful of customers yesterday.

Other stalls had already been vacated.

An employee, who did not want to be identified, said they had been informing customers since Saturday about the closure.

She said the food space attracted both locals and foreign nationals and that yesterday was their last day at the venue.

Pointing to other empty stalls, she said some vendors 'move out since last week and some a month ago'.

Noting that she now has to seek other employment, she expressed hope that the owner of the food stall could find a new location, though she acknowledged that 'that takes time'.

A regular customer, restaurateur Joseph Henry, told the *Express* it was sad to see the Breakfast Shed shut its doors, adding that he had been patronising the eatery since its inception.

'What had made it successful in the past is they provided a cheap meal so they catered for the middle-class people. You were able to get a good meal at an affordable price,' he explained.

He said that over time the Breakfast Shed's standard improved under Government management.

But he noted that as vendors began paying rent in this improved waterfront location, they were forced to raise prices.

He argued that vendors at the Breakfast Shed were at a disadvantage because they now had to compete with other food outlets in Port of Spain that offered greater amenities.

'When you have to compete with other restaurants, for instance, facilities in Port of Spain, most of those facilities are air-conditioned, a more relaxing environment so then now why would someone especially working in these offices close by...if they have a choice to go into an air-conditioned facility and pay a particular price and an almost similar standard of quality of food, obviously they will go there,' he said.

He indicated that another disadvantage for vendors was exposure to the elements, noting that as an open space 'you would find a lot of characters coming around because in the closed (facilities) you would find security,' he stated. He believes all these factors could have contributed to the closure.

He reiterated: 'It is very sad that something that catered to the ordinary men has to come to an end.'

As an experienced restaurateur, he suggested it was vital for the powers that be to engage in dialogue with professionals in the industry to help the space rekindle itself into a successful venture.