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FEATURED

## McDonald's reopens in Amherst after remodeling

Justin Faulconer

Mar 8, 2019



McDonald's in Amherst reopened on March 1 after a complete makeover to the facility on U.S. 60 in Amherst.

Justin Faulconer

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After several months of renovation, McDonald's in Amherst is back in business.

The restaurant at 135 Richmond Highway reopened this past week following a complete remodel to the exterior and interior.

The building is more modern, has a larger kitchen area and full-sized, handicapped-accessible bathrooms and digital menu boards, said Mike Miller, the location's owner.

A kiosk in the lobby allows patrons to place their orders and a major change is an overhauled drive-through with speakers, replacing previous face-to-face via an employee working the window.

Freeman owns six other McDonald's in Virginia, including in Nelson County, through his business, Freeman Enterprises. He bought the Amherst restaurant three years ago and said the business has grown about 20 percent.

While giving a tour of the renovated facility to Amherst local government and business leaders last Thursday, he said the refresh was needed.

"We're poised to grow," Freeman said. "We believe this restaurant can grow another 25 percent ... now we've got more space."

The ordering board in the lobby allows for more accuracy since customers can do it themselves if that's how they wish to place orders. He said technology features haven't eliminated any workers' jobs.

"It's all about making us more customer-focused," Freeman said.

He said McDonald's locations across the globe are modernizing through a growth initiative. The roughly 3,100-square-foot Amherst location now includes five to six added seats, a new breakfast table, new ovens and increased cooking and storage space,

he said.

Freeman said the business does a lot of fundraisers and has a community focus.

“We want to support the community,” he told Amherst officials. “Expect more community investment from us.”

The renovation cost more than \$1 million, Freeman said. The location normally operates with about 60 employees, roughly 20 more than its current workforce due to the temporary closure, and it is hiring, according to Freeman.

Rachel Carton, a member of Amherst Town Council, said the business’s success is important to the town as restaurants generate much of its revenue through the meals and beverage tax, which town officials in 2018 boosted from 4 percent to 6 percent.

The meals tax money is a major reason the town has suspended its real estate tax rate in recent years, a measure Carton said Town Council wants to keep in place as long as it can. McDonald’s bringing in more money helps the town’s tax base and benefits projects such as an ongoing effort to establish a new park on Scotts Hill Road, Carton said.

“This improvement helps us improve the town,” Carton said.

Vanessa Angus, executive director of the Amherst County Chamber of Commerce, said establishments such as

McDonald's pull in a tremendous amount of traffic off the U.S. 29 and U.S. 60 corridors into town.

"It's always exciting to see a local business grow and improve," Angus said.

"Customers will definitely appreciate a more positive dining experience with the vast improvements made."



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Making progress on the green

## **Poplar Grove's renovation a strategic investment in course, amenities**

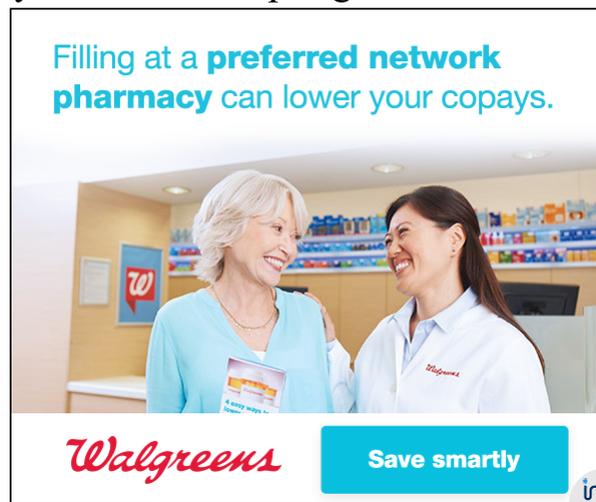
Justin Faulconer

Apr 4, 2019



Poplar Grove's investment in upgrading the Amherst golf community's 18-hole course and historic Manor House are in full swing. The \$3 million renovation project started in the winter and includes rebuilding all bunkers, a new fleet of golf carts, constructing two comfort stations with restrooms for golfers to grab a drink and take up shelter from rain, and extensive tree clearing to open up sights of mountain backdrops and rolling hills.

"That's what's spectacular," Jacob Mast, head golf professional, said of the scenic views while gazing at the fairways a week into spring.



The improvements to the roughly six-mile course enhance the golfing experience and add amenities to sustain vibrant membership, according to Mast. The Great Recession crippled the development's residential housing portion and the course was in "limbo" for a while, he said.

Despite a rainy winter season, the renovation project is making swift progress and is more than just putting Band-Aids on a few problems, Mast said.

“It’s an overall strategy to elevate Poplar Grove to the level it should be at,” he said.

The vast majority of bunkers have been excavated, he said, and the main goal is to make them more sustainable.

A 2014 graduate of Liberty University, Mast recalls his first time playing at the Amherst course, the last designed by the late professional golfer Sam Snead, in 2006. There wasn’t a weed on the course then and the green was as spectacular as any he ever saw, he said of the experience.

“It never gets old,” he said of the course’s many features and challenges. “Every time you play it, it’s something different.”



An estimated \$3 million renovation to Poplar Grove includes improvements to the property's historic manor house.

Justin Faulconer

The course has hosted multiple professional, NCAA Division 1 and amateur competitions and has been recognized as among the top 10 courses in Virginia. Mast said he describes it to people as like a resort destination.

“It’s that good of a layout,” Mast said.

The renovation is “extremely exciting” and improves the site’s playability, he said. Some fixes have benefited the course’s terrain and the overhaul also includes a new fleet of golf carts and practice facility upgrades.



Chase Penwell, of Southern Masonry Restoration, works on ongoing improvements Poplar Grove's Manor House as part of a renovation project on March 28.

Justin Faulconer

While the course's upgrades are targeted for completion later this spring, the major makeover to the Manor House, the cornerstone of the 1,000-plus-acre property dating back to 1773, is more tedious and will take longer, according to Mast. The work includes a 100-seat indoor and outdoor dining area, a luxury bar and overnight accommodations. The restored house and its features also will serve as a venue for weddings and celebrations, Mast said.

Todd Carter, a Poplar Grove member, said the renovation is "very professional" and exciting to see. He believes it will improve the overall experience 100 percent.

"Visually, it's going to be stunning," Carter said. "It's going to make a premier golf course when it's all done."

Ken Roberts, who visited Poplar Grove the last week of March, said while most courses are dormant this time of year, but he noticed how green it was. “Aesthetically, they took out the right trees,” Roberts said of the clearing to enhance the views.

Mast said the course is unique and features bentgrass, a more pristine, finer grass. Poplar Grove’s management is committed to revitalizing it to become a top 10 golfing attraction in the state, he said, and the course will be in excellent shape in May or June.

“It takes time, but it’s coming,” he said of the upgrades.

The course’s resurgence is good for Amherst County and attracting visitors to spend money, he said. The Poplar Grove Golf Club is focused on incentives for members, as well as accommodating guests who want a special experience and making them feel like family, according to Mast.

In addition to hosting member tournaments throughout the year, the club also has several weekly events where members of all ability levels are welcome. The course is at a level not seen in a decade, Mast said of the club’s optimism for the future.

“The best days of Poplar Grove are ahead of us.”



Todd Carter, a Poplar Grove member, smiles after landing a drive on the green on March 28.

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Photos: Making progress on the green at Poplar Grove  
Apr 4, 2019

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## Longtime Madison Heights restaurant Sid's Drive In to close its doors

Justin Faulconer  
Mar 27, 2019



Lois Connelly, owner of Sid's restaurant, stands in front of the counter with photos of family members nearby.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

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During the many changes among businesses and restaurants that have come and gone along the U.S. 29 Business corridor in recent decades, Sid's Drive In has been a constant in the Madison Heights community for more than half a century.

The restaurant — nestled in a gravel area across from the Walmart shopping center and known for its hamburgers, hot dogs and ice cream — is nearing the end of its run and plans to close sometime in April, said owner Lois Connelly. The property and a neighboring structure, Ye Olde Antique, which recently closed its doors, will become a new car wash. A few other structures also are on the 1-acre property.

“Every single one of those structures is coming down to accommodate the car wash,” Jeremy Bryant, Amherst County’s director of community development, said.

The Amherst County Planning Commission on March 21 approved the site plan for the new car wash, which is cleared to begin construction.

Connelly said she’s been part of Sid’s for 53 years, and the diner was a popular hotspot in Madison Heights before then. The brick building with a homey feel, a jukebox and personal photographs on the wall, including a portrait of its original owner, the late Sid Hedrick, has looked the same for decades and attracts a steady flow of customers.

“They’re really sad it’s closing,” Connelly said. “To me it’s been a home away from home.”



Lois Connelly, owner of Sid's restaurant, hands a customer a carryout order last week.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

Connelly, who recalls first working at Sid's cooking hot dogs, said her health is getting bad and she came to the tough decision to sell. She said it was difficult finding help for the diner.

She made a vow to Hedrick, who died in July 1993, to keep the restaurant like it was when he ran it, she said.

"I told him I would run it the same," Connelly said.

Jill Connelly-Mays, her daughter, recalls working at Sid's decades ago while growing up and said her mom is known among generations who have eaten there. When Connelly-Mays goes camping, she said friends ask her to bring chili and slaw from the restaurant.

She feels a reason it built such a niche in Madison Heights is it didn't change much while its surroundings did.

"The food stayed the same," she said.

Frank Tomlin, a longtime customer, said he's been going to Sid's since he was 8. Fifty years later, he still loves the hotdogs, bacon cheeseburgers, milkshakes and Connelly's homemade tea.

"It's going to be missed by a lot of folks," Tomlin said.

He recalls it as a drive-in and ordering food at the window and taking it back to his vehicle after hearing the order through an intercom system. He described Connelly as a pillar of the community.

"She's got a heart made of gold," Tomlin said.

The former antique shop next door that recently closed was run by sisters Ruby Carrico and the late Dolly Coleman, who died in December. It was a friendly gathering spot for deputies of the Amherst County Sheriff's Office. Sheriff E.W. Viar, who described the sisters as like family to the sheriff's office, said shortly after Coleman's death both homegrown businesses closing is a loss for the community.

The property is zoned B-2 general business and does not include Boomers Barbecue, which operates in a small walk-up structure adjacent to Sid's, Byant said. The car wash will be three lanes that narrow into a single lane and pass through the 3,376-square-foot structure, he said. The new business also will include 21 parking spaces with vacuums and two canopies.

Lighting will be arranged so it is directed away from adjacent properties and streets, according to the county. Three graveled entrances serve the lots and will be closed to accommodate two new commercial entrances, which Bryant said meets a Virginia Department of Transportation goal to reduce conflict points on U.S. 29.

“Reducing from three to two [entrances] from a transportation standpoint is a good thing,” Bryant said.

Sidewalks also will be required along the frontage of the highway as part of an ongoing initiative to expand them in Madison Heights, Bryant said.



A photo of Sid Hedrick, the original owner, still hangs inside the restaurant.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

Connelly-Mays recalled the restaurant burned down and was rebuilt just more than 40 years ago. She said her mother worked most of her life, still puts in 12-hour days at the diner and she hopes she enjoys life after retirement.

“Her connection with Amherst County has always been working up there,” Connelly-Mays said.

She described Hedrick as a wonderful person and a constant presence at the restaurant. Her mother stayed true to what he started, she said.

“He was a very special man,” Connelly-Mays said. “He was just like a father to me.”

Connelly said when Sid’s closes she will miss the familiar faces that come in and the friendly atmosphere.

“We had a great little business here,” Connelly said.



Customers enjoy a meal at Sid's Drive In last Friday.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress