

Valley workers struggle with rent

Laura Peters and Monique Calelo

Staunton News Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

STAUNTON — Alison May never imagined this happening.

She's jobless and steps away from being without a place to live.

"I'm not able to make ends meet right now," she said.

May recently lost her job at Hops Kitchen inside Basic City Beer Company in Waynesboro due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Her boss gave her food, which was distributed to all the employees, but now she's without pay and struggling to figure out how to pay rent on her Waynesboro apartment.

"I was one month behind in rent, now I'm two, so I'm very concerned with that, honestly," she said. "I would have nowhere for me and my pups to go should we be evicted."

May was banking on her tax return to play catch up, but now that money is going to have to go towards food and other necessities.

"It's extremely stressful," she said. "I have loved my job with great intensity since the day I started with them, so losing that at this time was just devastating."

May applied for unemployment last Wednesday and still hasn't heard back.

Others are in the same boat — their jobs are nearly nonexistent due to the outbreak.

Lauren Boyd can't do her job being six feet away from her clients. She's a hairdresser in Waynesboro at Harris and Co. Salon in downtown.

She's mentally preparing for the worst — not being able to pay her bills.

"(I'm) between the depressed and accepting stages ... trying to keep the daily as normal as I can for my son, while mentally preparing for the worst," she said.

Boyd rents a booth at the salon and she stopped working March 15. She lives with her significant other in Waynesboro with their young son. They don't have much in savings, but her household had two incomes so they get by. She has no sick days or vacation day to help pad the rest of this uncertain time.

Boyd can't apply for unemployment — since she's self-employed and files a 1099 form.

According to the Virginia Employment Commission, sometimes an employer classifies workers as contractors instead of employees (say you file a 1099 form). Those contractors are responsi-



A recently unemployed white collar worker sitting outside a building.

GETTY IMAGES

ble for paying their own payroll taxes and are not eligible for unemployment insurance if their services aren't needed.

Chief Workforce Development Advisor Megan Healy said that the state wants online claims to go through their portal at vec.virginia.gov/. She encouraged people to apply, even if they aren't sure if they qualify because the rules change so rapidly.

"So if you are denied, we're going to keep that data," Healy said. "So if the rules change from the Department of Labor, then we can also start going back and issuing folks' checks."

Although her partner can work from home, things will be "up in the air" after this month in terms of finances.

"We will be OK for now, but not for long if I can't go back to work," she said.

She's tried offering a 15% discount for prepaid services to all of her customers who's appointments have been compromised by this situation.

"Some have obliged ... not many," she said.

Andrew Gilford is a full-time wedding photographer. The past week he spent draining some of his savings to

pay for cancellations.

"I could have \$15,000 in my account but if eight people cancel, I owe them \$1,000 each," he said. "If people start cancelling altogether, refunds will have to be made. That'll quickly cut away at the savings as well."

His wife, who is a full-time physical therapist student at Murphy Deming College of Health Sciences at Mary Baldwin University, doesn't work.

"She feels awful that she can't help with finances," he said.

They have a good bit saved up, but he said that would only last three to four months if all the other weddings he had booked start canceling. The main problem is much like Boyd, Gilford can't apply for unemployment.

So Gilford is finding other ways to make ends meet, like online classes for fellow photographers and a podcast.

He's been offering past and upcoming clients with deals on raw footage.

"Basically, everything I film from the wedding is put on a hard drive and the price is currently extremely discounted," he said. "I've had six people in the last week purchase that, which makes up for the one refund I've already given."

Landlords in a tough spot

Jack Holt owns the Morrison Building on the corner of Church and Beverley streets in Staunton and has given some thought to the potential problem his tenants are facing.

"Here's what I can tell you now. I realize that it is a possibility. If it comes to pass, I'll make a decision on a case-by-case basis. I will certainly be lenient."

The Holt family have their own expenses, he says. And he doesn't take money out of the Morrison Building. He used the income from tenants to operate it.

"I can't forgive everybody's rent and keep paying mortgage payments, utility payments, tax payments."

He thinks this will be the universal response from landlords facing this situation.

"I think that I would have compassion for anybody that is out of work and was unable to pay their rent," said Holt.

If someone was a good tenant, he might be more lenient given their rental history versus someone who wasn't a responsible tenant in the past.

"I could be pretty compassionate about forgiving lateness," said Holt. "It would be more difficult for me about forgiving payment."

What about the Holt family and their own home?

"The holder of my mortgage is also a compassionate person," Holt said. "If I got behind, I imagine he would give me some forgiveness time-wise, but not bottom line wise."

Holt has three apartments occupied by people who could find themselves unemployed in the next few months, he said. He also has commercial space on the ground level.

"If they close their doors, then I suppose they won't pay their rent," he said.

"We just take it a day at a time, and we make the best decision when we need to with the data that we have at the time."

Marc Borzelleca owns two long-term rentals and three furnished rentals (rented through AirBNB mostly) in Staunton. He said that his long-term tenants seem to be alright for now — one is a teacher and the other is retired. He continues to pay the mortgage on that house where the two people rent, so he feels things will remain unchanged with that property.

"If they came to me and said they

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Rent

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couldn't pay rent we would certainly understand, but so far they are OK," he said.

His second property has been hit hard. All the AirBNB reservations for the next two months have been canceled. Some of those reservations had people renting the space for weeks.

"Though that property is paid for, I still have to pay utilities, cable, taxes, insurance, water, etcetera, so we are hurting with that," he said.

AirBNB is giving everyone who wants to cancel their reservations a full refund, he said.

"I believe that Air BnB hosts also don't qualify for small business emergency loans but they are working on being included," he said. "We don't need financial assistance to cover our expenses now, but if this continues for several months, we will certainly be losing a lot of money, and it does make up a third of our income."

Borzelleca said he's fortunate. He's a freelance graphic designer so his business is already home-based and he can continue working from home like usual. He wanted to help those in the restaurant industry to submit their favorite food recipes so he could design a cookbook that could be sold or used to raise money.

Lisa Bryant, who manages Big Sky Apartments on Community Way in Staunton, said they are getting information from the National Apartment Association in regards to managing tenant late payments and anything else pertaining to the COVID-19 outbreak.

"At this time, our company is looking at some policy changes to handle that issue," she said regarding a tenant's potential loss of income due to COVID-19.

Bryant said Park Properties Management Company, the regional management company for the NAA for the Staunton area, is meeting on a daily basis and then providing information to their property managers, such as CDC guidelines.

Big Sky hasn't been contacted by any tenants at this point, said Bryant.

"We're fortunate. We anticipate that might happen, but so far we have not," she said.

Remaining hopeful

Crissy Fales and her fellow coworkers had to close up last week at The Depot Grille in Staunton. She and many others are now faced with uncertainty.

"We're all scared about how long this is going to last and how were going to afford to feed our families," she said.

As a single parent, Fales has no sense of when things will return to the previous normal.

Despite the fear of losing everything, Fales remains upbeat and hopeful.

"Everyone is trying to help each other in any way we can, one of my line cooks brought in a case of toilet paper to hand out when we were cleaning out all the food," she said. "The owners of the restaurant sent all the prepped food we couldn't use home with any staff member who wanted it and donated the rest to the mission. We are definitely fortunate to have support within each other."

Fales has cut back on spending and

filed for unemployment.

Gilford is trying to remain optimistic as he tries to adapt his business to the new reality.

"Even with some plans set, I'm not sure of the longevity or ample income they will provide. But, it's a start," he said.

Local businesses who have had to let their workers go have also started up GoFundMe pages.

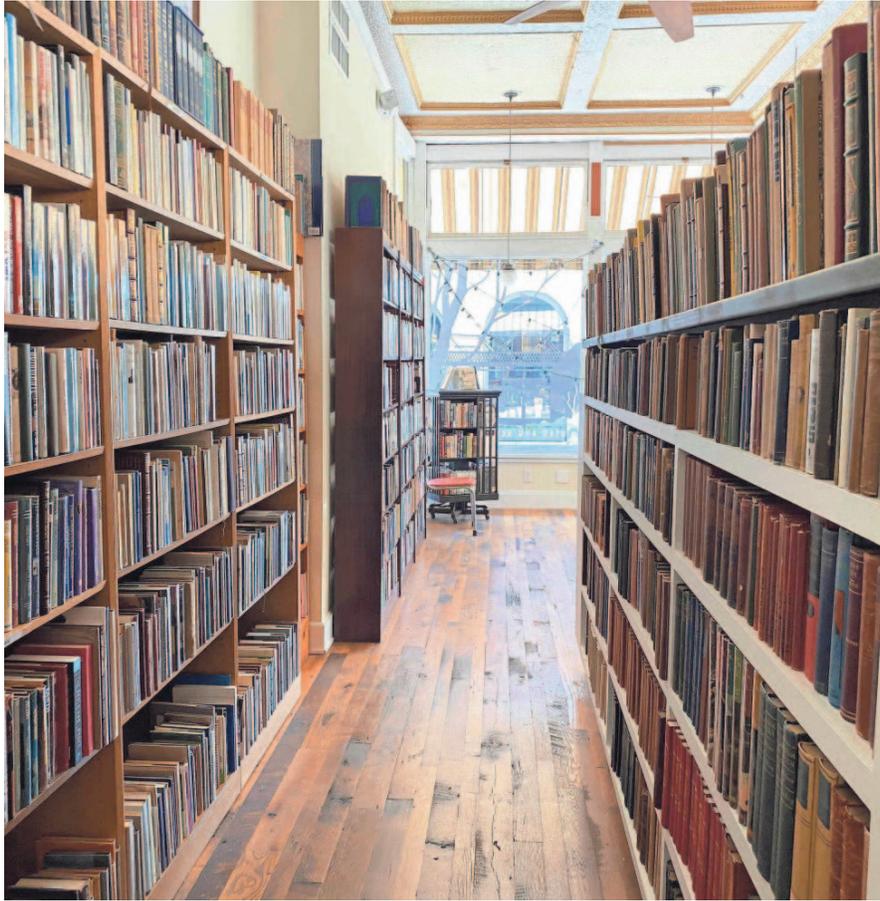
For Jims Hinkle, who also works at Depot, he's waiting to hear from unemployment. But his restaurant also has a GoFundMe campaign for the employees. Other restaurants like Baja Bean Co., Blu Point, The 101 and more have similar campaigns.

"What gets me is the uncertainty of everything," he said. "I do like seeing the community reaching out to one another to help in various ways. It's just a waiting game at this point."

Have a news tip?

You can reach reporter Laura Peters at lpeters@newsleader.com. Follow her @peterslaura.

CHAPTER ENDS



Black Swan Books in Staunton, which has announced it will close after eight years of business, became a home for poetry readings, art showings, live music and more. PHOTOS BY JAMIE COOKE/SUBMITTED

With heavy heart, owner of Black Swan Books in Staunton decides to close eclectic bookstore

Laura Peters

Staunton News Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

Jamie Cooke holds back tears in his eyes. He's sitting on a gray bench near the old Staunton train station.

Eight years ago Cooke joined the family business and opened a Staunton location for Black Swan Books. His family has owned the store in Richmond since 1996.

Cooke never thought he'd be part of the business — he'd previously worked as an architect in Richmond, but soon found himself burnt out. He never knew he'd be the architect of a community space that Black Swan became.

Cooke announced he would be closing the store that has served as a space for artists, bibliophiles, Stauntonians and more.

"It's definitely not about me, but the need for community space," he said.

Cooke met with a News Leader reporter on that bench overlooking the train tracks. Some could say it was symbolic, like he was waiting for the next train to come along and take him to his next career path. But he was in a holding pattern for so long due to COVID-19 and figuring out next steps.

He's not worried about what will come of the space that used to be filled with his store that sits on the corner of Augusta and East Beverly streets. He



Black Swan Books in Staunton, which has announced it will close after eight years of business, sits on the corner of Augusta and East Beverly streets.

"A bookstore is a gathering place. It's a kind of place where people come to chat and then another person comes in and starts a conversation."

Jamie Cooke, owner of Black Swan Books

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Black Swan

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knows someone will snatch up that prime real estate.

“Someone will come and do something awesome there,” he said.

Peter Dering has managed the shop for the past four years and said it served as a good place for a lot of people.

“I hope others can move forward with the faith that we shared in this community and build stronger firmer foundations for us all. It ended with members from our community playing music to help us stay sane,” Dering said. “To those who cared so much, we will find it again. We’ve already seen how we care for each other and it’s amazing. Stay true.”

Cooke’s used and unusual book model isn’t feasible anymore.

“We need 100 people coming through every weekend,” he said.

The vast majority of sales comes from tourists and people coming in for events — either poetry readings, art showings, live music and more. Cooke said there’s no way he can recreate that same volume during the pandemic. He tried a couple live streamed events, but said it wasn’t the same.

He is afraid there won’t be a venue like what Black Swan offered people — a safe, collaborative environment filled with literature, lyrics and life.

“It’s easy to romanticize a bookstore



There are more than 10,000 books inside Black Swan Books in Staunton, which has announced it will close after eight years of business. The bookstore’s used and unusual model, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is no longer feasible: “We need 100 people coming through every weekend,” owner Jamie Cook said. JAMIE COOKE/SUBMITTED

job,” he said.

For the most part, Cooke agrees, it’s pretty romantic. He spent his time collecting weird, eclectic books, stuff that other stores weren’t selling. And it worked.

“A bookstore is a gathering place. It’s a kind of place where people come to chat and then another person comes in

and starts a conversation,” he said.

It’s magical, too. The love and admiration that people had when they entered his store was overwhelming. Cooke said that those traveling to the area were always so smitten with what Staunton had to offer, it was surreal to experience that behind the counter.

He will be working to pack up the

nearly 10,000 books in the store. Some will go to auctions, others to warehouses.

The store in Richmond will continue, Cooke said. As for him, he said he isn’t sure what’s next, but whatever he chooses things will be alright.

He released the following statement on his social media:

“It is with a heavy heart that I announce the closing of Black Swan Books and Music here in Staunton. We were welcomed with open arms by the community in 2012, then embraced and nurtured by those arms for eight beautiful years. The new retail landscape makes much of what we did unfeasible, and the events we dearly loved hosting a thing of the past. We have considered many options to carry on, but they all fall short of the role we had played in the community.

“We are deeply grateful to the amazing people we employed over the years, especially Peter Dering. His love of music and culture vibrated positivity into the business for four wonderful years.

“We are certain that Staunton will welcome the next occupant of 1 East Beverley Street with the same graciousness and excitement we enjoyed, and that the next chapter will delight in ways we can’t know yet.”

— Jamie Cooke

The space has been listed for lease on Cottonwood Commercial.

Contact reporter Laura Peters at lpeters@newsleader.com; follow @peterslaura.



Cracks and broken pavement are shown in the parking lot of the Staunton Mall, which tenants say has been sold. MIKE TRIPP/THE NEWS LEADER

Staunton Mall allegedly sold

Tenants told they must vacate within 30 days

Laura Peters

Staunton News Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

Rumors over social media were flying over the weekend, saying the Staunton Mall has been sold. Tenants confirmed to the News Leader and over their own social media accounts they had been told Friday the mall had been sold and they had 30 days to vacate.

The property, which is in Augusta County, is located off U.S. 11.

Matt Shiflett, who co-owns Know Knew Books in the mall, posted in the Facebook group "I grew up in Staunton, Virginia" saying the tenants received a letter from the new owners to vacate in 30 days.

"All tenants received letter from the new owners demanding us to vacate within 30 days and verbal confirmation from previous owner to management that they will be demolishing it," the post said. "Word from a realtor is that it will be turned into a truck stop, however I can't confirm that part."

The News Leader has reached out to the current mall management, but did not hear back immediately. Also, the record of the sale has not gone through county records yet, according to the Virginia Mass Appraisal Network.

According to Angela Chen, whose family owns Hot Wok inside the mall, they received a letter from the current owners late last week.

"We got a written notice saying the current owner has sold their interest to another LLC and that tenants with 'month-to-month verbal leases' had 30 days to vacate," she said in an email. "It appears every tenant received this notice, even the ones with long term leases."

Chen's family recently re-opened a larger and renovated space for their

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Mall

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restaurant just before Thanksgiving. They relocated from the food court inside the mall to a separate storefront that used to house Country Cookin'. They also opened a new restaurant in the spot called Fuego Mexican Grill, which is Hot Wok's sister restaurant — a build-your-own taco, burrito, bowl concept, Chen said.

Hot Wok has been open for 22 years inside the mall. When the newer spot opened up a few weekends ago, they had a line out the door. Now, they don't know what's next. On Monday, Chen said she had a lot of unanswered questions from the mall.

"We are not sure what the next steps for us look like ... still trying to find out details and such," she said.

Previous auction attempt

Last year, the mall was up for auction. The auction was online through an online auction service called Ten-X.com. Ten-X is a digital platform that buyers can log onto in order to bid. Colliers International is the brokerage firm handling the auction, according to the site. Colliers International agent Jay O'Donnell in Charlottesville has the property listed on his profile under properties for sale. The News Leader has reached out to O'Donnell but did not immediately hear back.

According to O'Donnell in 2019, the current owners wanted to put the property up for auction in an attempt to argue the current assessment of the property. Nothing came of the auction, but the mall was talking to potential buyers late last year.

The property located in Augusta County is valued at \$9.3 million, according to Augusta County tax information. That includes the almost 35 acres the mall sits on, four buildings and other improvements, according to tax records. The land alone is valued at almost \$2.8 million.

Losing tenants

The mall has been steadily losing larger retail tenants in the past years.

J.C. Penney closed in June, leaving Belk as the only anchor store at the mall. In 2018, Peebles left the mall because the store was going out of business. But the mall management at that time said more stores were set to come.

At that point, the mall was at 62 percent occupancy, but has moved up to 79 percent, when the movie theater opened in the mall called Legacy Theaters and Sooner BBQ out of Stuarts Draft opened a spot. Sooner BBQ is no longer at the mall, but the theater is still operating.

In 2017, multiple stores closed, including Family Christian Bookstore and the Shoe Department. The gymnastics studio relocated as well. Before those



The outline of the long removed signage for the Peebles store that was once over one of the entrances is shown at the Staunton Mall. Current tenants have been told they have 30 days to vacate because the mall is alleged to have been sold. MIKE TRIPP/THE NEWS LEADER

stores closed, the mall was at 70 percent occupancy rate, which also counts the outparcel buildings surrounding the mall like Red Lobster, Dollar Tree and Sprint.

The Staunton Mall also lost two big tenants in 2017 — CrossFit Staunton and Staunton Health and Fitness. The two businesses announced they would be moving to the former Elliott Auto dealership just down Greenville Avenue from the mall. One former mall tenant, Head Over Heels Gymnastics, already moved out of the mall to the Elliott building.

The past

The mall has seen some changes in ownership, as well.

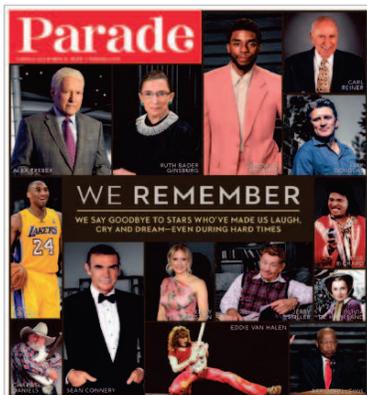
Staunton Mall Realty LLC sold the property to Staunton Mall LLC, a Delaware company, on Feb. 19, 2014, for \$4.5 million. Once the mall was sold, a new management team came in, which has also seen turn-

over. Asprey Real Estate Corp. took over management in 2015.

Since the new management took over, there have been promises of revamping the mall and renovating.

- Here's a rundown:
- The property began as an open air shopping plaza concept in 1969.
 - In 1985, it was renovated and roofed in for indoor shopping.
 - In 2004, then-owner Colonial Properties Trust announced it wanted to sell what was then called Colonial Mall Staunton, along with five other malls it owned.
 - First Republic Group Realty purchased the property in 2007, renaming it Staunton Mall.
 - Staunton Mall Realty LLC bought the shopping center in November 2010 for \$4.05 million when then-owner First Republic Realty was in bankruptcy.
- Contact reporter Laura Peters at lpeters@newsleader.com. Follow her @peterslaura.

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