

Business booms for food trucks, but logistics cause real struggle

Marion is working to achieve a fair solution for all

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS

Staff

Few businesses have thrived during the pandemic, especially eateries. However, there's usually an exception to the rule – and, in this case, the exception has flourished.

Monday evening, Brad Mullins, the owner-operator of a Brad's Tasty Dawgs Food Cart, told the Marion Town Council that during the last three months food trucks have experienced growth of 300%.

Despite the success, Mullins was before the town's elected leaders with a problem – one he feared would prompt him to relocate his cart to another county. The Chilhowie man's voice shook

with emotion as he described the situation.

Brad's Tasty Dawgs came into being in the summer of 2019. A long commute combined with 16-17 hour work days as a manager had taken their toll on Mullins. He was burnt out. On his days off, he and his wife would often come to Marion to hike around Hungry Mother Lake.

“On one of our adventures out,” he said, “I wanted a hot dog and we couldn't find one I truly enjoyed.... A few days later I started researching, trying to find a good hot dog in the area and I kept coming up empty. I remembered all the food trucks/carts in Nashville [where he once lived] and a light went off in my head.”

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Food

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The day before his June birthday, Mullins told his wife what he wanted: “to quit my job and start a hot dog cart.”

Needless to say, she agreed.

He started out in Tazewell County, where he spent many of his growing up years. The drive grew old.

He connected with Ken Heath, Marion’s economic development director, who helped get him licensed and operating in front of the courthouse.

Business boomed. Brad’s outgrew the space. He’d made friends with and inspired Josh Widener, who wanted to set up a shaved ice cart.

Eventually, they set up side by side on the town-owned parking lot off Main Street near the East Chilhowie Street bridge. Again, business boomed.

Over time, other food vendors joined them in the space, creating a food truck row. The food vendors, Mullins said, worked well together – even taking conflicting items off menus.

However, tensions grew with another vendor also utilizing the public parking lot. Officers with the Marion Police Department were called multiple times.

As problems grew, the town of Marion ordered all the vendors to vacate the parking lot.

Mullins disagreed with that decision, noting the meals tax that the food vendors are generating for the town. He also told the

council that he buys 65% of his supplies locally, getting up at 4 a.m. to go to businesses with which he has arrangements.

If the situation can’t be worked out, Mullins said, he’ll be forced to move his business to another county. “We need your help,” he told the council.

Town Manager Bill Rush told Mullins, “We want to help all we can.”

However, Rush also noted traffic concerns about the area and that the MPD had been called four times. “I have to do what’s fair for all,” he said.

Heath noted that the town does have an application process for food trucks that it doesn’t for other mobile businesses. He also cited the benefit of the food trucks’ meals tax revenue, which, he said, has helped the town get through the pandemic.

While Mullins has worked out a temporary arrangement with Keith Hungate, who owns one of the buildings at the lot, but it’s not permanent.

Rush said there’d be no easy solution achieved Monday evening and he wanted a structure that’s fair.

Ultimately, the council referred the situation to Heath and his economic development department and the council’s Economic Development Committee, requesting that recommendation be brought back in two weeks.

Of the food trucks, Heath said, “They’re another reason for people to come to Marion.”

Reflecting on the situation later this week, Heath said, “Food trucks are ex-



LINDA BURCHETTE/SMYTH COUNTY NEWS & MESSENGER

The Polar Express Shaved Ice crew was working Friday at the Main Street lot under an agreement with a private property owner.

ploding, and we love it. It started with Brad’s Tasty Dawgs, and he’s inspired Polar Express Shaved Ice, now Gypsy Coffee, and D’s Grub. They fill in the gaps and expand the offerings of the community, and add new excitement, especially with E&H students.”

Business Update

In economic development news, Heath noted that Marion has lost several businesses in recent months, including Worldwide Ford, multiple check cashing establishments, Southern Reflections and the Downtown Tavern.

On the up side, he said, two new businesses are joining the town.

The Toy Box will soon be coming to the downtown’s Centre Building. Arnold and Jessica Davidson from Saltville are expected to open on Monday, Aug. 31, carrying classic toys, comic books and similar items.

Morghan’s on Main, owned by Randy Hamm, does wholesale pallet sales and the space, according to Heath, “is an ever-changing assortment of

great stuff, from furniture to electronics to toys.”

Heath also noted that the town is planning to once again offer its business entrepreneur “Pop Up” class this fall. The program has received state and national recognition for its success in helping rebuild the downtown and taking its vacancy rate from double digits to less than 5%.

Alexandra Veatch, Marion Downtown’s director, noted that the town has recently won about \$15,000 in grants to add to its loan pool.

“Business is still good,” Heath said.

Tuesday, he observed, “We’ve worked with businesses through the pandemic, helping entrepreneurs and potential business owners, and we’re so excited to start looking toward a light at the end of the tunnel so this virus doesn’t get to pick and choose the winners, but we get back to helping make every business a winner.”

Developers plan Mountain Dew museum

Ellis believes popular soft drink museum, store and soda fountain could bolster tourism

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

As its birthplace, Mountain Dew can do more for Marion than just provide bragging rights.

Developer Joe Ellis is confident that while preserving an aspect of the community's heritage, a Mountain Dew museum and retail shop could also bol-

ster the local economy through tourism.

Ellis has been researching the idea since 2010. This fall, he and several other developers took a major step forward, purchasing the Hayden's World building, an adjoining structure and related apartments in downtown Marion. For several decades, the structure housed the Marion Drug Company.

Last month, Ellis said he and the four other partners in Callan Farm Investments would like to restore the drug store's soda fountain and open the Mountain Dew Museum complete with a retail souvenir shop.

According to a variety of accounts, Marion resident Bill Jones worked to get all the necessary rights and tinker with the formula for the popular soft drink, eventually creating the taste that made it famous. He sold it to Pepsi-Cola in 1964.

Part of the taste came from a

Tennessee company that gave its recipe for an unsuccessful whisky mixer to Jones as part of another transaction. That company had apparently dubbed its drink "Mountain Dew," a throw-back to the days of moonshine.

Over the years, more than one dispute about Mountain Dew's beginning has arisen.

Speaking at the Holston River Heritage Center in 2015, Joseph T. Lee III shared his research into the history of soda bottling in the area, including the feud over Mountain Dew's origins.

"I often joke that I was weaned on Mountain Dew," said Lee, who continued, "As a soda, Mountain Dew's history isn't really that interesting. It's the feud between all of those, and their decedents, trying to lay claim to creating it that makes it interesting. I am just a fan of the brand, and I'm fascinated by the search for the real history of what actually happened."

Lee donated two historic Mountain Dew bottles to the

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Main Street museum.

In his research, Ellis found that about 40,000 people a year visit the birthplace of Pepsi in New Bern, N.C. Additionally, he said that as many or more people make the trek to the Dr. Pepper Museum in Waco, Texas.

"If we can bring even 25,000 to downtown Marion, it would be a huge boost," said Ellis.

On the corner of Main and Chestnut streets, Ellis believes the museum would be strategically located to bolster other downtown shops. With a one-time Greyhound station at its rear, Ellis foresees tour buses visiting the museum and the rest of downtown. Two buses a day, he said, would be 100 tourists. "That could really have a positive impact," he observed.

Should Rural Retreat, which boasts connections to the origins of Dr. Pepper, develop a celebration of those ties, Ellis said tours could stop in both towns, "becoming good book-ends."

The building's structural foundation is strong, Ellis said, so renovations would primarily be installing new floors, paintings and giving the structure a facelift, especially the upstairs apartments.

Providing different options for housing in Marion has long been a goal of Callan Investment group, which is developing Callan Drive near the Emory & Henry School of Health Sciences into a new neighborhood with recreation and a variety of home lots, apartments, and more. It's a community Ellis takes quite personally. He's building a personal residence on one of the lots.

Earlier this fall, the group also bought Park Terrace and is working to update those apartments.

"We're trying to provide good quality housing at different price points," El-

This design captures developers' vision for what a portion of property on lower Callan Drive may become.

lis said.

The developers are also considering establishing an elder village on lower Callan that could accommodate a variety of incomes but create a sense of community. He noted that a nearby elder village has a "huge waiting list" with half of those wanting in currently living outside of Virginia.

Of the elder village in Marion, Ellis said, "We'd love to see that happen."

The COVID-19 pandemic is also heightening some individuals' interest in living outside of major cities.

"We're beginning to see people interested in more rural areas," said Ellis.

As for the Mountain Dew Museum's timeline, Ellis said the group is "feeling our way through it."

They hope to establish a non-profit to oversee museum operations and lease the soda fountain.

Right now, Ellis would welcome copies of historic photos of the drug store's interior, which may be dropped off at the General Francis Marion Hotel's front desk.

"We're excited to do that," he declared.

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Ernie Sullins: 50 years later

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

Ernie Sullins doesn't sugarcoat the story of his business career. He remembers when one dollar looked like a fortune, when he spent the better part of nine months sleeping in a box truck and when having too much pride cost him.

Fifty or so years later, even more Sullins remembers the people who helped him through those times.

Over the last half a century in Southwest Virginia, the name Ernie Sullins has become synonymous with affordable clothing – from jeans to suits -- in a wide range of sizes. He specialized in Big & Tall sizes long before department stores did.

Sullins decided to venture into the retail world as a secondary career. He was already working in the county's education system. In 1970, he launched a discount clothing business.

Last week, he remembered hanging his first clothes on a rod he bought from Francis Brothers, Marion's hardware store at the time.

Marion Mayor David Helms recalled first buying clothes from Sullins in a trailer on a lot behind what is now Burger King on Main Street.

In just two years, Sullins opened his first storefront on Pendleton Street in downtown Marion.

The 1980s brought expansion as Sullins bought and renovated a store in Abingdon.

In 2011, he opted to relocate

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his Marion business to a high visibility spot just off Rt. 16. After renovating what is his current location, the Chamber of Commerce of Smyth County recognized Sullins' work with a beautification award.

More expansion came in 2013 when Sullins added a Bristol location to his retail business.

Now, after five decades, Sullins has decided it's time to retire – sort of.

He told the Marion Town Council last week that he'll celebrate his 76th birthday in February. "I'm not old enough to retire," he declared.

He did say he's turning over the business to his

niece and nephew, but he'll help out with buying and other tasks. "Nothing will change," he said.

Sullins spent time reflecting on the people who've helped him, especially those who offered a hand up when he needed one. He particularly recognized Clayborne Gwyn for his help in getting him started. "How much I respect those people," Sullins said.

Sullins also thanked the town, saying the local government has backed and trusted him for 50 years.

Mayor David Helms reflected that anything Sullins has done in Marion has made the town better. The mayor cited Sullins' buildings. He may have particularly been thinking of the former Pepsi building that Sullins bought and built a



FILE PHOTO

In 2012, Ernie and Carol Sullins were recognized by the Chamber of Commerce of Smyth County for the improvements he made to his current Marion location on Rt. 16.

successful business in.

Last week, the council recognized Sullins, adopting a resolution in his honor. That resolution described him as "a leader in our community and region in many, many ways."

The document said, "Throughout his career, Ernie Sullins has exemplified the very best of our Marion business family, providing

quality products and top level service to customers throughout Southwest Virginia; and... after fifty years of perpetual motion, community involvement, and business leadership, Ernie Sullins has decided to retire. Now... we... express our most sincere appreciation for the citizen-, community-, and business leadership provided by



STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS/SMYTH COUNTY NEWS & MESSENGER

Ernie Sullins was recognized by the Marion Town Council last week for his 50 years as a businessman in the community. Sullins was joined by his wife, Carol, friends and other family members.

Ernie Sullins throughout his career, and sincerely thank him for all of his contributions to Marion and our entire region by sharing his personality, his business acumen, his salesmanship, and his love of our town, and we wish Ernie and his wife Carol a long, happy, and prosper-

ous retirement."

Sullins expressed his love to his wife and told the gathering, "I thank the Lord for letting me pull it through."

He also noted that he stood there with two possessions that money can't buy: health and peace of mind.