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JAMES HASKINS

# POINT OF NO RETURNS

Before Walmart and Amazon, Sears pioneered the American retail experience. Now, the company is leaving Chesterfield – for good

**BY RICH GRISET** STAFF WRITER

**S**urrounded by empty shelves and bare showroom floor, the mannequins congregate eerily in one corner: headless, armless and naked.

Electric blue and fuchsia signs advertise slashed prices of 40% to 70% off as bargain hunters scavenge the increasingly empty clothing racks for deals. Apart from any curated display, a row of luggage stands near the escalators, stranded as refugees of one last sale.

“All Sales Final,” proclaims a sign. “No Returns.”

At Chesterfield Towne Center, it's end times for Sears, the last of its breed in the Richmond metro area. Once this two-story, 147,000-square-foot department store was the height of consumerism, selling a wide range of quality, affordable products to a mass audience. Now, like the luggage, this place faces an uncertain future.

The Richmond region's last remaining Sears, at Chesterfield Towne Center, is slated to close for good next month. What the future holds for the fading national retailer, and the mall, remains to be seen.

Last November, Sears owner Transformco announced that this location would be one of 51 Sears and Kmart stores to close in early 2020, leaving the company with 182 Sears and Kmart stores remaining in the United States. Just 10 years ago, Sears operated 3,500 stores.

It's another nail in the coffin for a company that was once the largest retailer in the U.S. Founded in 1892, Sears, Roebuck & Co. was the Amazon of its day, pioneering the idea of selling everything – appliances, clothing, tools and even homes – to everyone, first through mail-order catalogs, then through sprawling stores. Today, there's no other brick-and-mortar retailer quite like it, where customers can purchase seemingly anything under one roof.

“It was the largest retailer on the block for much of the century,” says Vicki Howard, an England-based

See **SEARS** on page 4

## Daugherty seeks \$100M in new funds for schools

**BY JIM McCONNELL** SENIOR WRITER

**T**he ink has barely dried on Superintendent Merv Daugherty's proposed operating plan, but school and county officials already are jostling to establish a narrative that will define Chesterfield County's fiscal year 2021 budget negotiations.

The superintendent and School Board members contend they need every penny of the \$777.3 million Daugherty

See **SCHOOL BUDGET** on page 4



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## SCHOOL BUDGET from page 1



Merv Daugherty

JENNY MCQUEEN

requested last week from the county and state to meet the demands of a diverse, growing school system they say has been funded inadequately for more than a decade.

It represents an increase of nearly 15% over the school system's current budget, and includes about \$35 million to give Chesterfield teachers their largest pay increase in nearly a decade.

County officials appeared to dismiss the bid for \$100 million in new school spending, however, characterizing the superintendent's budget proposal as excessive and suggesting its most costly initiatives should be funded over time as part of the joint county/schools five-year spending plan.

Their respective opening salvos set the stage for debate on two fundamental questions that have been percolating in Chesterfield for some time: How much of the county's general fund should be allocated to the school system, and does the historically conservative local government have enough money to serve a population that's asking more of it than ever before?

According to County Administrator Joe Casey, the answer to the second question is clearly "yes." Casey noted last week that his proposed fiscal year 2021 budget (which will be introduced in March) will not require an increase to Chesterfield's current real estate tax rate of 95 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

Countywide property assessments are projected to rise by 3.8% this year, providing the county with about \$28 million in new local revenue.

"We are already burdening [taxpayers] with an increase in the average tax bill even if we maintain the existing rates," Casey said during the Board of Supervisors' afternoon work session last Wednesday.

"We have to be mindful of everybody in Chesterfield County," he added. "The average tax bill is going up faster than the inflation rate. We have many people on fixed incomes. We're approaching 70% of our households that don't have school-age children. We have to do our best in presenting a combined school and county objective on a quality of life so 100% of the people understand what we're doing with their precious tax dollar."

Striking that balance isn't easy in a county that is growing rapidly at both ends of the demographic spectrum.

Census data indicates Chesterfield's

senior population has increased by 49% since 2010 – easily the most of any of the Richmond region's four largest localities.

Because of the rising cost of housing, the number of mortgage- and rent-burdened seniors living in the county has nearly doubled over the past 20 years. Affordable housing advocates say a family is cost-burdened when it spends more than 30% of its monthly income on housing.

County leaders have been reluctant to increase the property tax rate because it would have a disproportionately adverse impact on seniors living on fixed incomes and potentially price them out of living in Chesterfield.

At the same time, the county's K-12 student population is growing by about 1,000 annually, as families with school-age children continue to be attracted to a school system that's considered one of the best in Virginia. And many young parents today seem less reflexively opposed to the notion of raising taxes than those in prior generations.

"Taxes aren't always a bad thing, particularly when the money can help us get out of some of the issues we're facing with our school system," such as overcrowded classrooms, a teacher shortage, chronically late buses and deferred facility maintenance, said Joe Elias, the father of two Wintercock Elementary School students and president of the school's Parent Teacher Association.

"We spend less per-pupil in Chesterfield than any of our peer localities in Virginia. That's not something to be proud of," he added.

Elias and about 50 other representatives from Chesterfield PTAs were scheduled to meet with state lawmakers and discuss education funding Monday morning as part of the annual PTA Day at the General Assembly.

They also are rallying parents, teachers and support staff to advocate with members of the Board of Supervisors in support of the superintendent's budget proposal, which currently exceeds projected revenues by about \$54 million. That's roughly equivalent to 14 cents on the county's property tax rate.

School Board members will present the superintendent's spending plan to citizens in their respective magisterial districts at a series of community meetings between Jan. 29 and Feb. 10.

The Board of Supervisors is expected to vote Feb. 19 to advertise Chesterfield's maximum property tax rate for this year.

"This isn't a wish list – this is keeping us above water to help us meet the needs. I think everybody realizes [the school system's] needs are greater than they were 10 years ago, and the responsibilities are greater," Daugherty said during a media briefing last Tuesday.

School officials maintain they need more money to address challenges associated with concentrated poverty, particularly in the eastern half of the county. More than 24,000 Chesterfield students, or about 38% of the total student population, are now eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

Since the end of the recession, the number of Chesterfield schools that qualify for Title I funding – based on the percentage of students from low-income families – has grown at a far greater rate than the school system's allocation from the federal government.

The school system also is facing increased demand for services from non-English-speakers. Minority students now represent a majority of its total enrollment for the first time, and Hispanic students are its fastest-growing demographic group.

Because of revisions to the Virginia Department of Education's funding formula, the county government is being asked to provide a larger-than-expected share of the school system's budget this year.

While state funding for Chesterfield schools is expected to increase by \$31.5 million under Gov. Ralph Northam's budget, that's about \$4 million less than school officials planned to receive from the state in fiscal year 2021, which begins July 1.

Noting that all five members of the Board of Supervisors said they support public education when they were running for election last year, Chesterfield County Council PTA President Ben Pearson-Nelson called on them to back up their talk with action.

"If they don't believe in funding education, they should just come out and admit it," he said in an interview last week. "This is my seventh year as a PTA officer and I've seen things get progressively worse in our schools. We're riding on our reputation and things are starting to come apart."

During a presentation to the Board of Supervisors last Wednesday, Deputy County Administrator Matt Harris pointed out that Chesterfield's increasingly diverse population is not solely an issue for the school system – and that allocating even half of the new school spending that Daugherty has requested of the county government would leave it with barely enough new money to give its employees a 2% salary increase, let alone pursue other initiatives.

"The same challenges the school system faces, we face in social services, mental health services, the aging population and all of the other needs," said Leslie Haley, chairwoman of the Board of Supervisors.

Clover Hill Supervisor Chris Winslow acknowledged he was "a little bit shocked" by the size of the superintendent's funding request.

Reached by phone on Monday, School Board Chairwoman Debbie Bailey called Daugherty's plan a "needs-based budget" to ensure that the school system is "fully funded," but said she is willing to work collaboratively with the county on a budget that is "fiscally responsible, [while] at the same time trying to address the needs of our school system."

"I am not going to back away from that request," Bailey said, referring to the proposed budget. "We can fund these needs, maybe, over a course of time."

Pearson-Nelson claimed county officials present a false narrative to citizens by "driving wedges" between the school system and other county departments and pitting them against each other in a competition for local dollars.

"If we want to have a thriving community, we need to have good firefighters, police, schools and roads," he said. "We shouldn't have to choose." ■

## SEARS from page 1

business historian who focuses on consumer society and retailing. "It was ubiquitous across the consumer landscape. Every small town main street would have a store, and then, after World War II, every shopping mall would have a Sears or J.C. Penney."

For generations, Sears helped establish consumer trends; to hear Howard tell it, it was Sears that taught Americans how to shop in the modern era. A Sears coming to your town meant the sudden availability of dependable goods, well-paying retail jobs and a place that the whole family could shop together. It built the world's tallest building, founded schools for African American children in the South before desegregation, and helped drive the creation of the postwar shopping mall. Now, as e-commerce and shifting consumer tastes continue to ravage the traditional brick-and-mortar retail model, Sears is facing extinction.

**T**he story of Sears begins with a savvy bit of salesmanship.

While working as a railway station manager in 1886, Minnesotan Richard Warren Sears began selling gold watches to fellow station managers; with the recent implementation of time zones in America, railroad workers used the personal clocks to stay on schedule.

Sears would then start a mail-order business selling the watches with watch repairman Alvah C. Roebuck. The two men's business pursuits were in flux early on, but in 1893 they established Sears, Roebuck & Co., selling a wide range of products by catalog.

At the turn of the 20th century, most Americans lived in rural areas, and the Sears catalog offered farmers living near small towns a way to access goods outside of their local general store. Instead of having to contend with negotiable prices and sales that relied on a storekeeper's estimation of a person's credit, Sears catalogs offered a wide range of goods with clearly stated prices and made a point of soliciting customer feedback.

The Sears catalog of 1894 was 322 pages and featured everything from agricultural equipment and clothing to sporting goods, bicycles and automobiles – all of which could be shipped to rural areas by train. The catalog was more than just a list of goods and prices; it educated consumers through its spreads. Catalog copy advertising tableware might explain the placement and usage of rarer utensils like an asparagus fork, for example.

"They produced a very detailed and massive catalog that would outline all kinds of goods, things that most people would not even buy, as well as all kinds of agricultural implements . . . low-priced fashions, jewelry, all kinds of wares," says Howard, a history professor at the University of Essex in England and author of "From Main Street to Mall: The Rise and Fall of the American Department Store." "People might not have been able to afford much, but at least they could look through the catalog and see what was available."

Through its catalogs, Howard says Sears helped develop a consumer mentality



## On the web

For details on school system's proposed budget, visit [chesterfieldobserver.com](http://chesterfieldobserver.com).



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The Sears department store on West Broad Street in Richmond, above, in the 1960s. A two-page spread on denim jeans in the Sears Christmas catalog from 1962, right. Sears, Roebuck & Co. began selling merchandise via catalog in the 1890s.

in Americans. Instead of making items yourself or purchasing them second-hand, it was now a point of status to own something new and modern.

In 1895, Chicago clothing merchant Julius Rosenwald – who helped direct the company’s accelerating growth and diversifying product line – became a partner. Rosenwald would later establish the Rosenwald Fund, which built nearly 5,000 schools primarily for African American children in the South in the early part of the 20th century.

In 1906, the company opened a massive 3 million-square-foot distribution center in Chicago; as the nation urbanized and became less dependent on mail-order services, the distribution center became the site of Sears’ first department store in 1925. The company rapidly expanded, operating more than 300 department stores on the eve of the Great Depression.

By modeling itself as a paragon of thrift, Sears continued to grow through the Depression, becoming known for staple items like socks and sheets instead of more fashionable items that were sold at other stores.

As suburban and automobile culture rose following the post-World War II boom, new, inward-facing shopping malls began siphoning retailers away from main streets and downtowns.

Sears followed suit, becoming synonymous with the suburban shopping experience that embraced car culture. Unlike the downtown department stores, these mall-based Sears locations offered ample free parking, sold auto parts and often had auto service centers on its premises. Amid the rise of fashion-centric department stores, such as Thalhimers and Macy’s, Sears carved out a blue-collar niche, becoming known for its low prices, apparel that was practical and durable household goods such as appliances and tools.

By 1973, Sears, J.C. Penney and Montgomery Ward made up 43% of all department store sales in the United States. It was around this time that Chesterfield would receive a Sears of its own.

**O**n Aug. 16, 1972, the first phase of Cloverleaf Mall opened on Midlothian Turnpike. Named for the yet-to-be constructed Chippenham Parkway cloverleaf interchange, the mall would include 42 stores, and feature a 173,000-square-foot Sears as one of its three anchors.

Developed by retail pioneer Leonard L. Farber of Pompano Beach, Florida, Cloverleaf was a social destination, drawing hundreds of thousands of shoppers from across the metro area; it was such a success that Farber would go on to build the grander, two-story Regency Square in Henrico County in 1975, which also included a Sears.

As a native of Virginia Beach, Garland Pollard warmly recalls visiting the Sears at Pembroke Mall with his family.

“It was rather like going to an Amazon store, [considering] the variety of merchandise,” says Pollard, a former Richmonder who now resides in Sarasota, Florida, and publishes a branding website called Brandland USA. “The genius of the actual Sears stores was that there were so many different departments and so many different products that there was always something interesting for the whole family.”

For devotees, Sears’ appeal was that of durable, no-frills products and honest sales practices and warranties. These qualities also applied to the company’s private label brands. To people of a certain age, there’s no appliance more reliable than a Kenmore; no better tool than a Craftsman. Sears offered unlimited lifetime warranties for most of its hand tools. And, should a Kenmore machine break, Sears’ appliance repair experts were available throughout the country.

“You had a dependable person to come and fix it, and would do it at a consistent price that was fair,” Pollard says. “People respond to wholesome, apolitical companies that serve their customers, and it worked as long as they served their customers and supplied interesting things to them.”

According to Howard, Sears was unique among retailers for its extensive tool, gardening and car care areas, which meant that each family member had a part of the store that spoke to them.

“In a world where the shopping mall and the department store were feminized spaces ... it’s my opinion that Sears held a special place among male consumers,” Howard says.

Brian Glass, senior vice president of retail brokerage for Glen Allen-based Taylor Long Properties, says Sears’ appliances were one of their many strengths.

“They were the market leader in white goods: refrigerators, stoves, washing machines,” he says. “They also had



phenomenal strength with their tools. ... The Sears brand was very strong.”

In the 1970s, inflation began to lure customers away from Sears to lower-price retailers like Walmart, Target and Kmart. Sears took it on the chin from both ends of the market, with upper-middle class consumers opting for the more stylish offerings of higher-end stores, and bargain hunters heading elsewhere. Still, Sears was the largest retailer in the world, and in 1973 moved its headquarters to the newly constructed Sears Tower in Chicago, which would stand as the world’s tallest building for nearly 25 years.

In the 1980s, Sears began pursuing what it called a “socks and stocks” business strategy, attempting to incorporate financial services into its retail model. Sears purchased stockbroker Dean Witter Reynolds and real estate broker Coldwell, Banker & Company. It also launched the popular Discover credit card in 1985.

Things began to change in the 1990s, when discount shopping retailers Walmart and Kmart further capitalized on the lower end of the market and big-box stores like The Home Depot gained ground, specializing in the types of goods Sears had been known for. Walmart overtook Sears as the nation’s largest retailer in the early ’90s; by 2001, Walmart’s revenues were five times those of Sears.

Sears attempted to recover its standing in various ways, such as spinning off its non-retail entities and discontinuing its catalog after sales and profits declined, but nothing quite worked. Additionally, the brand’s image took a hit after a series of pricing scandals were revealed, with the California Department of Consumer Affairs successfully suing the company for engaging in systematic fraud for suggesting unnecessary repairs at its auto care centers.

In 2005, Kmart Holding Corp. purchased Sears for \$11 billion, becoming Sears Holdings. Under the watch of hedge fund manager and new CEO Edward Lampert, Sears sold off many of its most popular brands and divested some of its best real estate locations to cut costs and pare down debt. It reinvested little back into its retail stores, failing to rekindle its connection with

consumers in the age of e-commerce. Sears declared bankruptcy in 2018 but remained open after Lampert won a bankruptcy auction last year. In the wake of the auction, Lampert formed the privately held company Transformco to purchase the surviving assets of Sears Holdings.

Glass says he’s surprised that Sears’ demise has taken so long, given that there hasn’t been any major reinvestment in the company since the 2005 takeover.

“They really didn’t put the money back into getting the brand back into shape, remodeling stores, doing what you need to do to freshen your image,” Glass says.

Though some have stated that better management may have changed things for Sears, Howard is skeptical.

“Sears just represents an older form of retailing that’s under siege from a variety of outside factors,” she says. “[Sears] survived 100 years, but I’m not sure going forward what its place will be in American society. These firms that people get attached to and occupy a sort of space in their childhood and in their daily lives are not permanent.”

Locally, the closing of the Cloverleaf Sears in 2003 contributed to the demise of that mall five years later, as Sears was its last anchor tenant. Last November, Transformco announced that it was shuttering the Chesterfield Towne Center Sears that opened in 1996. What will happen to the property is anyone’s guess.

Reached for comment, Paige Hidlay, Transformco spokeswoman, says that a liquidation sale is in process, and that they plan to close the store in mid-February. She declined to discuss future plans for the property.

“The real estate at Chesterfield Towne Center is a good piece of real estate,” says Glass. “Somebody will do something with that. I’m sure it’s not going to go unnoticed.”

Robert Gibbs, an urban planner, managing principal of the Gibbs Planning Group, and longtime retailing consultant, says it’s depressing to see a “superstar” of retail with such brand recognition and customer loyalty go under.

“People trusted Sears,” Gibbs says. “It’s sad to see them go.” ■



JENNY McQUEEN

# Service interruption

For local restaurants, surviving COVID-19 is a tall order

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

**B**efore the coronavirus pandemic, you could stop by any Chicken Fiesta location at lunchtime on a normal day and get a sense of its success.

A seemingly endless parade of rotisserie chicken, fried yucca and Tex-Mex offerings with a Colombian flare flowed from the kitchen into the bellies of patrons. Founded in 2006 on Midlothian Turnpike in North Chesterfield by Colombian native Harold Vega, the fast-casual brand has earned a dedicated following, and expanded into Richmond and Colonial Heights.

Chicken Fiesta was faring so well that last May it purchased a 15,000-square-foot property in Manchester to serve as its commissary and new base of operations. On March 11, it opened its fifth location at a former Pizza Hut in the village of Midlothian. During its first three days

of business, the new location went gangbusters, both inside the eatery and at its drive through.

But on the afternoon of Friday the 13th, President Donald Trump declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national emergency. For Vega, the impact was immediate, with business dropping off by about 60%.

“We’re kind of worried about the situation,” says Vega, 46, reached by phone on March 17. “We don’t know if we’re going to close. With 40% of the business right now, we cannot pay for the employees and the food and running the business. No way.”

Vega’s situation isn’t unique. As restrictions increase in the interest of public health – including Gov. Ralph Northam’s ban on nonessential

See **RESTAURANTS** on page 5

## INSIDE:

BUSINESS ANNOUNCEMENTS

TIPS FOR TELEWORKING

Harold Vega, owner of Chicken Fiesta, at his newest location in Midlothian village. With the coronavirus pandemic, he says business has fallen dramatically.

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**RESTAURANTS** from page 3

gatherings of more than 10 people last Tuesday – restauranters like Vega and their employees are left holding the bag. Even in good times, food service is a tough industry with low profit margins. As health restrictions make it harder for restaurants to do business and the economy likely heads into a recession, some of our favorite places to eat might not make it through.

For Vega, these recent developments have meant laying off at least 25 employees and cutting back hours for his remaining workforce.

“I’m worried about them. It’s kind of like my family, people who have been working for me for several years,” says Vega, who’s worked in restaurants his entire life. “It’s like a bad dream. A very bad dream.”

Eric Terry, president of the Virginia Restaurant, Lodging & Travel Association, says this situation can’t continue for more than a month without many restaurants closing for good.

“Very significant numbers of [temporary] closures already, and probably 80% of the restaurant staff has been laid off,” Terry says. “We’ve had a lot of closures even in Chesterfield County.”

While some restaurants have adapted to offering more takeout and delivery service instead of dine-in, Terry says traditional full-service establishments will have a rough go of it.

“They’re kind of getting by, but you can’t economically afford just to do the deliveries,” he says. “It’s hard to make that business model work.”

Terry has heard of various efforts underway to help blunt the coronavirus’s impact on restaurants – such as up to \$50 billion in loans from Small Business Administration and Virginia allowing all individuals and businesses to delay paying their 2019 income taxes by 30 days – but says he’s unsure if those efforts will be enough.

“They still have leases to pay,” Terry says. “They have utilities that are going to come due.”

According to 2018 figures from the association, Virginia’s 15,507 eating and drinking establishments did \$18.1 billion in sales that year. In 2019, roughly 378,600 people had restaurant and food service jobs, making up a full 9% of the state’s employment. In Chesterfield, a health department listing of all places that serve food, including gas stations and schools, numbered more than 1,100.

In addition to making things hard for restaurant workers, many of whom suddenly found themselves laid off this past week, Terry stresses that these restaurant closures will harm the average person as well. According to Terry, the public takes 45% to 50% of their meals at restaurants.

“Restaurants are an important part of [getting food] to people,” he says.

Tom O’Toole, co-owner of O’Toole’s Restaurant & Pub in Midlothian, is also feeling the burn. For O’Toole, coronavirus concerns came just as he and the staff of his Irish pub were gearing up for a week of festive St. Patrick’s Day celebrations; Northam’s 10-person gathering ban was issued the morning of St. Patrick’s Day.

“We were going to have a big outdoor tent,” says O’Toole. “We had a tent, we had everything sectioned off to do that, so [the coronavirus] kind of killed it. That’s kind of like the Super Bowl for O’Toole’s.”

Presently, O’Toole’s is only offering takeout and is staffed by employees who volunteer to work. Where a normal weekday might see about \$7,000 worth of business, O’Toole said the Wednesday after St. Patrick’s Day saw just \$900, with nearly half of that coming from a single takeout order.

Though O’Toole says he’s had good support from people in the area, including through the purchase of gift certificates, he doesn’t see a future for the business if this continues for more than a few weeks.

“We’ll be shut down, yeah. There’s no other way about it. I don’t know when this is supposed to end,” O’Toole says. “More than anything else, I worry about my employees. I don’t have the means to pay them [while closed].”

Kevin Healy, owner of the HOUSEpitality Group of restaurants that includes The Boathouse, Casa del Barco and Island Shrimp Co. locations, says he shut down operations of his eight eateries on March 15. At the time that he temporarily closed his businesses, he had 416 people on the payroll.



JENNY MCGUEN

Harold Vega, owner of Chicken Fiesta, opened the eatery’s fifth location in Midlothian village earlier this month.

“I just consciously can’t put people at risk. I just can’t do it,” he says of the decision. “Everyone was let go with no pay. They can’t use their paid time off. If 400 people tried to use their PTO, we’d run out of money, so we’re saying we suspended operations.”

Healy says he didn’t consider offering takeout as a feasible option, and worried that it might impact his employees’ health.

“We are not a takeout restaurant [experience],” Healy says. “We haven’t really pushed that piece, and again, you’re bringing employees together to work together ... to produce food. It’s contrary to what they’re telling you to do. We’re not a life or death thing. We’re not a

hospital.”

Reached again by phone earlier this week, Chicken Fiesta’s Vega says the future is uncertain.

As the reality of the situation sank in and people became more comfortable with the fact that they would just have to carry out their orders instead of dining in, Vega says business increased to 50% of what it usually is. But he’s not sure it can last. He says he plans to meet with his employees on Tuesday morning to discuss whether or not they’ll stay open, and perhaps try to ramp up deliveries.

“I’m just going to talk to everyone to see how were going to survive.” ■

A longer version of this story can be found at [chesterfieldobserver.com](http://chesterfieldobserver.com).

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# A new normal?

On edge but desperate to get back to work, county businesses begin the process of reopening

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

As a youngster in rural southern Louisiana, Ramona Phillips fell in love with hairstyling while watching her mother cut and mold the hair of women in their small town of Talisheek.

“She did everybody’s hair in the kitchen,” recalls Phillips, who says her mother was what’s known as a “kitchen beautician,” meaning she never had any formal training. “I just took a liking to it from that.”

When Phillips grew up, she got her cosmetology license, practicing in Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina before landing in Chesterfield in 1990. Since then – aside from a six-month stint elsewhere – Phillips has been a fixture at Market Square Shopping Center at two different salons. In 2004, she purchased Alexander’s, the salon where she’d worked for the past decade, and changed the name to About Your Hair.

But Phillips’ livelihood was in jeopardy when the pandemic forced her to

close her doors on March 24. As she rents booths to five other stylists who weren’t paying for space while the salon was closed, she had to dip into her savings to pay the bills.

All that changed on Monday, May 18, when she was finally able to reopen after seven weeks of being closed.

“Scary,” Phillips says, on the verge of tears. “I wouldn’t have made it another month.”

On May 15, most of Virginia entered the first phase of Gov. Ralph Northam’s plan to reopen the economy, allowing many businesses across the state to open their doors to customers at 50% capacity.

Retailers are now allowed to operate as long as employees working in customer-facing areas – sales floors and other areas where staff interacts with customers – wear coverings over their nose and mouth. Restaurants, breweries and other establishments that serve food or drinks are now allowed

Ramona Phillips, owner of About Your Hair, reopened her salon in Market Square Shopping Center off Hull Street Road last week.

See **REOPENING** on page 7

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**REOPENING** from page 5

outdoor dining and beverage service, with no more than 10 people seated as a party. Tables must be 6 feet apart and employees in customer-facing areas must wear face coverings.

Beauty salons, barbershops, tattoo shops and other personal care and personal grooming services are also allowed to reopen, provided a number of conditions are met, including that both employees and clients wear face coverings.

But businesses are reopening as reported coronavirus cases continue to spike in Chesterfield. Though Northam touts a number of figures as justification for reopening – including a decrease in the percentage of positive tests and a more widespread ability to test – there are other markers the state hasn't yet met. And on May 20, Chesterfield hit its highest number of reported cases in a single day since the pandemic began.

As Virginia experiments with reopening, businesses in Chesterfield and elsewhere are working to adapt to this new paradigm.

Sportspage Bar & Grille, a laid-back sports bar at Ivy Mount Square Shopping Center, has begun taking advantage of its sidewalk by adding seating for 16. In addition to permitting to-go alcohol sales during the pandemic, the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority has temporarily loosened its regulations to allow businesses to add or expand patios to comply with Phase 1 conditions.

"We have a makeshift patio that we put four tables out on," says Kim Mitchell, whose family owns Sportspage. "It was great, because we have a lot of regulars that are really ready to get back in here. We had a full patio all weekend long."

Though they've offered takeout through the pandemic, Mitchell says food isn't really the bread and butter of their business.

"We make most of our money off of selling booze," she says. "We have been selling booze, selling it to-go. It's not ideal, but we're keeping the doors open."

Asked if she's worried about the health risks of serving food to customers during the pandemic, Mitchell says she doesn't have much choice.

"I don't know what to say, hun," she says. "I've got to have my business open. Do I want to be around 50 people right yet? Not really, but it is what it is."

The Shaved Duck, an upscale casual restaurant in Westchester Commons, has turned its sidewalk and the parking spaces in front of its storefront into an outdoor dining area for 20 to 30 people.

"It's kind of an adaptation, since we don't normally have a patio," explains Lauren Wrenn, the restaurant's marketing director. "We're kind of playing it by ear before we add any extra seating."

Though the restaurant has offered curbside carryout since the pandemic began, it started outdoor

dining service on May 16.

"Everybody is ready, but we're all a little nervous, to be honest," Wrenn says. "You still want to have the same comfortable environment."

LeeAnn Athanafatos, co-owner of Shear Design in the Courthouse Commons West shopping center, says she was worried the novel coronavirus would wipe away the years of work she and her partner put into making their hair salon a success.

"I'm so excited. It was horrible being off," Athanafatos says. "My worry was my business. I knew I could make it, but I didn't think the business was going to make it."

Explaining that they'll be sterilizing the beauty stations and taking customers' temperatures before they come inside, Athanafatos says she's ready for business, though not everyone was on board; one employee decided not to return over coronavirus concerns.

"We're being as safe as we can possibly be," she says. "Myself, personally, I respect the virus, but I don't particularly fear it, because I know we're doing what we need to do."

Not all businesses that have the option are choosing to reopen yet. Escape Massage in Midlothian is aiming to reopen mid-June during what the owner and managers hope will be mid- to late Phase 2 of Northam's plan.

"The biggest thing for us was we can't necessarily adhere to the social distancing with the amount of employees that we will have to have in the building," says Jamie Thames, manager of the Midlothian location. "You can't massage from 6 feet away."

As for About Your Hair, Ramona Phillips says she's glad to be back in business.

"We're all in here, very busy, very fortunate," she says. "Some customers are still a little leery and are holding off, but for the most part, most of our clients are ready."

Acknowledging that it's "a little tricky" to cut the hair around a customer's ears while they're wearing a mask, Phillips says she's had some customers try to come in without one.

"Some don't want to do it, but then they're not allowed to come in," she says. "You have to have a face mask on. We want to make sure we do this correctly." ■

Sportspage Bar & Grille in Midlothian has added outdoor seating for 16 on its sidewalk. So far, they've mainly played host to a group of grateful regulars.



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