

Playwriting festival scheduled for Barter Theatre **B2**

Barter Theatre crosswalk will get upgrades to increase visibility **B1**



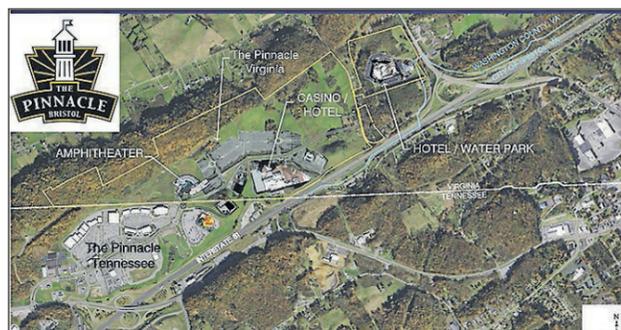
Washington County News

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COMMUNITY

Dueling casinos

Pinnacle owner, Cherokee agreement sets up conflicting proposals for Southwest Va. gambling



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians has reached an agreement with developer Steve Johnson to develop and operate a casino on a 350-acre tract in Washington County, Virginia, adjacent to The Pinnacle retail center.

BY TIM DODSON
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

BRISTOL, Va. — Developer Steve Johnson and a federally recognized Cherokee tribe announced an agreement last week to establish a proposed casino in Washington County, Virginia, just one day before the General Assembly convenes for a session that could see the state legalize casino gaming.

The new casino proposal raises questions about whether

See **CASINOS**, Page A5

General Assembly Pillion plans to focus on education

BY DAVID MCGEE
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

New 40th District Virginia Sen. Todd Pillion counts two education issues — reducing the number of standardized tests and seeking increased funding — among his priorities for the new legislative session.

Lawmakers returned to Richmond last week. Speaking with the Herald Courier last week, Pillion, a Republican from Abingdon, said both issues are top of mind



Pillion

See **PILLION**, Page A6



Rotary Frolics returns for 71st year at Barter Theatre stage

» **B1**

AGRICULTURE



Beekeeping and related classes on the rise in region

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MLK DAY



Member of 'Clinton 12' will speak in Abingdon for MLK Day events

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CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
BELOW: Doug Beatty turns the head gate control to start the water wheel at White's Mill in Abingdon. The White's Mill Foundation has spent the last 20 years restoring the 18th century Abingdon landmark to a working grist mill that will grind cornmeal and grits.



WHITE'S MILL

CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

LEFT: Recently restored gearing will enable White's Mill to be up and running by spring.



Run of the mill

White's Mill back in working order, plans for community center

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
ABINGDON, Va. — After 20 years of volunteer restoration efforts, White's Mill Foundation is putting the pieces in place that will help a historic Abingdon landmark once again operate as a working water-powered grist mill. The exciting news, said foundation members Jennifer Kling

and Doug Beatty, is the centuries-old mill that once served as a post office and polling place is also being transformed into a living history museum, recreating historical settings for tourists and members of the community.

In addition to structural upgrades to the building, most recently, the mill's gearing has been restored and the wooden

flume rebuilt after years of neglect. The mill used water power until 1989, after which it succumbed to the ravages of time and the elements.

According to both Beatty and Kling, the original mill could be up and grinding corn and grits as early as spring — more than 30 years since a farming community last heard the thunderous roar of gears meshing

together on the banks of Toole Creek.

The refurbished grist mill will grind corn once hooked to the gears. "The millwright has to do some fine-tuning before that can happen," said Kling.

In the meantime, the mill has continued to supply local restaurants with freshly ground

See **MILL**, Page A5

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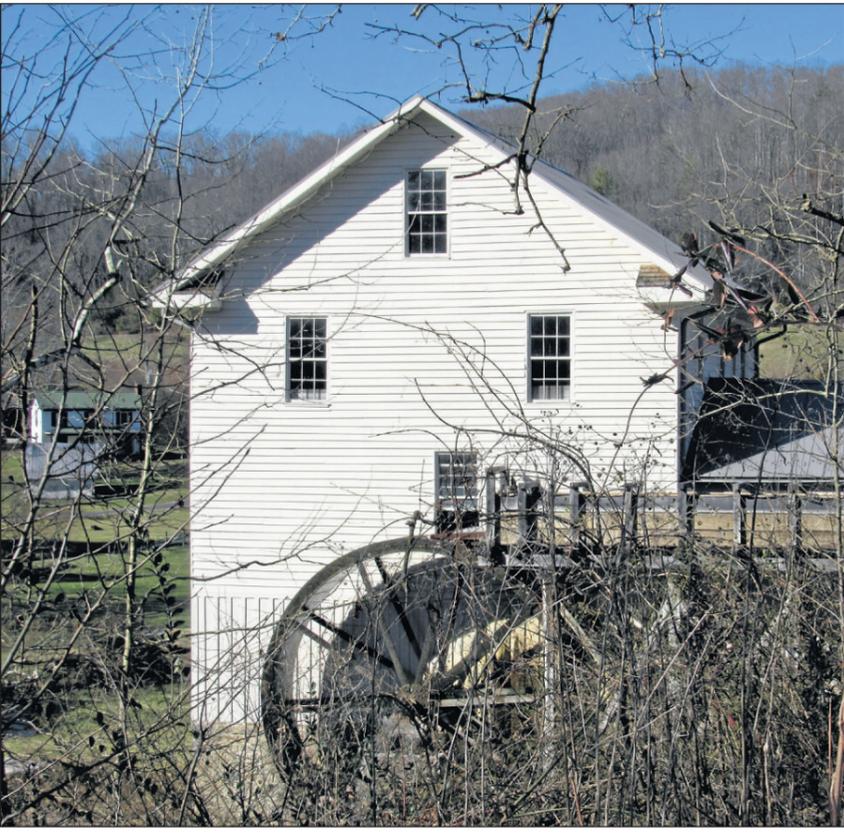
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CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

An aging White's Mill required structural renovations to the building. One of the first tasks was to replace the weathered boards with new poplar siding that was painted white.

Mill

From Page A1

cornmeal. A small 1915 New Williams mill — which runs on electricity for now — makes cornmeal, grits and corn flour, a natural product that contains the germ of the grain. Only the chaff has been taken off, she said.

The plan is to make the working mill a community hub, attracting members of the community just as it did in the day when people gathered at the late 18th century mill for the news or fellowship.

The foundation will showcase the refurbished mill — only a few miles from town — with a grand opening this summer, inviting the public to learn about alternative energy and historic grinding practices.

According to Kling, water power is one of the cleanest forms of energy. “Water power does not pollute the environment. The water from the creek turns the wheel and goes straight back to where it came from.”

She explained the water mill uses the flow of water from the creek to turn the waterwheel. A shaft connected to the wheel axle is then utilized to transmit the power from the water through a collection of gears and cogs that work machinery, such as a millstone to grind corn.

“That metal shaft is what the millstone upstairs is sitting on. When that starts turning, the stone starts turning.”

A modified sifter has been added to the equipment in order to produce freshly made grits.

“Grits [were] not ground here originally — they just did cornmeal. But, we thought it would be nice to make grits since they have come into vogue lately,” said Kling with a smile.

“We’re also getting rustic White’s Mill signs made that will hang on the side of the building.”

‘A working machine’

“You’re literally standing inside a working machine,” said Beatty, as he forcefully turned the head gate control. Water soon cascaded over the outside waterwheel.

“I’ll tell you straight up. I’ve done a lot of things in my life. I’m a Marine, and I’ve put on concerts in Mexico, but this is the most exhilarating thing I’ve ever done. I’m not kidding you. Once you start this thing, it’s terrifying for just a second because of the sheer power,” Beatty said.

“It looks so cool with all the gears turning. We can eventually turn everything off that one main gear. It’s pretty amazing.”

Foundation board members recognized the value of preserving the mill as an educational tool for generations to come. White’s Mill is on the Register of Historic Places — both nationally and in Virginia.

“But the building was getting old. We had to locate timberwrights — specialized craftsmen — to work on the mill. Some pieces are original; others are brand-new,” said Beatty.

The first stage of renovations called for stabilizing the aging building.

“One of the issues we dealt with when we started the project was that everyone liked the way the mill looked — the gray, curling weathered boards. But the building was falling down. There was a lot of rot on the waterwheel side of the building. We had to shore that up and rebuild it.”

The exterior was replaced with poplar siding and painted white.

“With the white paint, it almost glows when the light is cast on it. It’s really quite striking,” said Kling. “The mill is 99% done,” said Beatty. “Now, we’re deciding which pieces of equipment to hook to the power train.

More work to come

In an effort to preserve the relic, the foundation purchased the mill and surrounding property in 2001 and engaged in the large restoration project, three of the four phases of restoration have been completed in the past seven years as money from grants, fundraising events and private donations became available.

Plans are underway to add a micro hydro unit, a type of hydroelectric power that produces electricity using the natural flow of water. The unit will generate electricity for the operation of the mill and aerate a fishing pond that will be stocked for community use. The mill operated trout ponds for a number of years.

Eventually, the foundation will restore a house across the road from the mill that belonged to the Miller family, who owned the mill since 1922. “Ultimately, we’d like to have someone live in the house who can operate the mill,” said Kling.

They also plan to build a barn on the mill property to use as a venue for classes, events, conferences and music events. “We hope to showcase

Appalachian trades and crafts by featuring a working blacksmith, potters, weavers and other traditional artists,” Beatty said.

The foundation is partnering with community agencies to establish the mill as a research, educational and community center. The primary partner has been Virginia Highlands Community College, which has used the mill as a tool for hands-on learning.

“For example, the students may use their skills to create a heritage garden, which will honor the natural heritage of this area.”

“I’m not from around here, so I understand the value of this project. Some people who live around here may take it for granted,” said Kling.

“In other places, a project this size would typically have employed a project manager and executive director, but all of this work is getting done by a handful of volunteers.

“It’s been a labor of love.”

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.



ANDRE TEAGUE/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians has reached an agreement with developer Steve Johnson to develop and operate a casino on a 350-acre tract in Washington County, Virginia, adjacent to The Pinnacle retail center.

Casinos

From Page A1

er longstanding plans for a casino at the former Bristol Mall site will face competition and how the dueling casino proposals may ultimately play out.

Under the announced agreement, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians [EBCI] would develop and operate a casino on part of a 350-acre tract owned by Johnson adjacent to The Pinnacle, a retail complex he developed across the state border in Bristol, Tennessee.

“I have visited the site along I-81 and I am impressed with its strategic, gateway location that serves a five-state area,” Richard Sneed, chief of the EBCI, said in a news release about the new proposal. “It is our wish to bring new tax revenue and jobs to Washington County and the Southwest Virginia region in a positive and impactful way.”

The tribe is known for its Harrah’s Cherokee Resort Hotel and Casino in Cherokee, North Carolina.

In addition to a proposed casino and luxury hotel, development on the Virginia side of the border would include a 15,000-seat outdoor concert venue, recreational facilities and a hotel with an indoor water park, the release states.

But this isn’t the only casino project in the works for the Bristol area — local businessmen Jim McGlothlin and Clyde Stacy have proposed opening a Hard Rock Bristol Resort and Casino in the former Bristol Mall, located within the city limits of Bristol, Virginia.

The Bristol casino group issued a statement Tuesday evening saying they have worked for 16 months with state and local leaders to complete the project, “as

a catalyst to boost our local economy in Bristol and Southwest Virginia. We understand, first-hand, what these jobs mean to our community.”

Bristol is one of five cities across Virginia that state leaders have considered for legal casino sites. A Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission study released in late November showed a casino in Bristol could prove financially viable and generate more than 1,000 direct jobs and \$130 million in annual revenue.

The study did not consider a casino in Washington County, however, and it remains to be seen whether Virginia would license a casino outside of the Bristol city limits.

Plans for The Pinnacle-adjacent casino drew sharp criticism from Bristol Virginia City Manager Randy Eads shortly after their release.

“There is an old saying that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” Eads said during a news conference the same day. “And the city appreciates Mr. Johnson recognizing the tremendous effort we have made as a city to revitalize the old Bristol Mall and bring true economic development opportunities to Southwest Virginia by imitating our initiative to bring a resort casino to Bristol, Virginia.”

A casino just across the border in Washington County was not authorized by the General Assembly or studied by JLARC, Eads said.

“It’s not even a feasible thing to consider right now,” he said.

Proponents of the EBCI casino say the same JLARC report lends support to using a competitive bidding process to award casino licenses.

“That JLARC study came back and said several things of importance, but one of

which is that regional competition is vital to identifying the best projects, and we agree with that,” said Greg Habeeb, a partner at Gentry Locke in Richmond, which was retained for the project by the EBCI. Habeeb is also a former member of the Virginia House of Delegates.

It’s unclear whether a competitive process would include casino operators outside of the studied cities.

For his part, Johnson said that he thinks his potential casino site makes the most sense for Southwest Virginia, citing its location along Interstate 81 and at interchanges between I-81 and U.S. Highway 11W and Gate City Highway.

“Any municipality would want a project like this. Again, I can’t help where the [locality] lines are drawn,” Johnson said. “To me, it’s not a Washington County-Bristol, Virginia issue. It’s a Southwest Virginia issue. It’s a state of Virginia issue.”

Asked about tensions over whether a competitive bidding process could extend across locality borders, Johnson said the General Assembly will decide the matter.

It would not be the first time Johnson has been in competition with Bristol, Virginia. His development, The Pinnacle, and The Falls, the retail/dining complex developed just miles away by the city of Bristol, Virginia, were announced days apart in 2012. For years, the developments have competed for tenants, though The Pinnacle has been more successful.

Johnson said he had been in talks with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians about the casino project in recent years but declined to provide more specifics.

Staff writer David McGee contributed to this report.

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WANDERING AROUND WASHINGTON

Editor's note: "Wandering Around Washington" is a regular, exclusive column from Joe Tennis highlighting the untold stories in the county, direct from the people who live and work here. Watch for him to wander into shops, restaurants and parks to bring you the gab and gossip — only in the Washington County News.

Lifetime dog tags next proposal for Washington County

ABINGDON, Va. — Wanna buy one dog license for life? Right now, that's just an idea in Washington County, Virginia.



Joe Tennis

But it's on the drawing board after a presentation by County Treasurer Fred Parker at the latest Washington County Board of Supervisors meeting on Feb. 24.

In recent years, dog-tag sales have consistently gone downward, Parker said.

The cost of processing dog licenses over the past 10 years has also increased, with consideration of processing orders with postage, Parker said.

"It's very labor-intensive," Parker said.

Statewide, more people are also choosing to use mobile devices to register such items as dog licenses, Parker said.

And yet some people may not register a dog.

People don't like "the Big Brother syndrome," Parker said. "They don't like us knowing everything about their dogs."

Parker says a lifetime dog license would "streamline sales, saving both time and money and energy."

Currently, the county mails up to 3,000 notices to renew dog tags each year, according to Parker.

And, he said, several localities have already made the change to a lifetime dog tag — just as he proposed.

Cost of the lifetime license is yet to be determined.

But Parker requested County Attorney Lucy Phillips to create a proposal for the lifetime license for dogs to be considered by the Board of Supervisors at an upcoming meeting.

Yet, Parker said, this license would be not transferrable, even if the dog had a new owner.

The change would require a public hearing.

"The original reason for dog tags was never revenue but health and safety," Parker said. "It was [because of] rabies."

Abingdon marks Restaurant Week

WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — The town of Abingdon is celebrating Restaurant Week (March 2-8) with specials and tasting menus at restaurants all over town.

Eleven of Abingdon's most high-profile restaurants are participating in the promotion, offering prix fixe menus, or special packages. Restaurants include 128 Pecan, Greeko's Grill and Café, JJ's Restaurant and Sports Bar, Luke's Café, Morgan's, The Peppermill, Rain, Sisters American Grill, The Tavern and White Birch Food & Juice. For a full list of menus and specials, go to <https://visitabingdonvirginia.com/blog/abingdon-restaurant-week>.

Other events include:

March 4: Sean Brock & ravis Milton

The Virginia Highlands Festival presents "An Evening with Chef Sean Brock & Chef Travis Milton," two renowned culinary personalities with Appalachian roots, in conversation at Barter Theatre's Gilliam Stage. The event will be followed by a Q&A.

March 6: The Crooked Road on Tour

A live performance featuring Martha Spencer & Whitetop Mountain Band and Wayne & Jayne Henderson at Barter's Smith Theatre.

March 7: Stories of Supper and Salvation

A live storytelling event from Roanoke-based Hoot and Holler, focused on how food is the community's great unifier at Barter's Smith Theatre.

SUBS OF SUBSTANCE



David and Jeanie Wampler take a break at their Jersey Mike's in Abingdon. The couple say they wouldn't spend their retirement any other way.

Couple's franchises for Jersey Mike's have staying power

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — David Wampler wakes every morning loving what he does.

And serving the community is a big reason he feels that way.

David and his wife Jeanie, of Kingsport, recently opened their sixth Jersey Mike's franchise in Abingdon — the No. 1 fastest-growing sandwich chain in the country. The couple plays active roles in the operation of their businesses — two in Kingsport, three in Bristol and one in Abingdon, which opened Jan. 29.

It's not uncommon to see the retirees working alongside the youthful high school and college staff, wearing aprons and hats while they slice meats and cheeses and prepare subs with baked-on-site bread.

"It's such a pleasure to take a customer's order and watch them see us make their subs. A guy told me the other day, 'This is a beautiful sub.' That makes you feel good," said David.

The secret of success, he said, comes with food that is authentic and fresh.

"Everything we do is fresh, and everything is made to order. We slice all of our meats, cheeses, onions, tomatoes and lettuce every day. Other sub shops use precooked beef, but we oven-bake our roast beef and cook our Philly steaks on a grill while the customer waits.

"My philosophy is that I want our customers to leave feeling better than when they came in."

Giving back to the community

The Abingdon restaurant got off to a whirlwind pace when the couple officially opened the doors of the Abingdon store at the end of January. The new restaurant had circulated 7,500 coupons throughout town offering a free regular sub for a minimum \$2 donation.

"We helped out in the Abingdon restaurant because our staff was so busy that first week," said Jeanie.

"Every week, we receive a newsletter from the Jersey Mike's headquarters," said her husband. "During that first week — which was only five days — we were No. 4 in sales among all of the country's nearly 2,000 stores.

"But it's more than just making subs. We give back to the community," he said.

They credit a lot of the opening-week traffic to a fundraising event that benefited a scholarship fund for Abingdon teen Kirk Nairn, who was killed in a car wreck the day before his high school graduation in 2019.

"Anytime a new franchise opens, the owner picks a local charity to benefit," said David, whose family is acquainted with the Nairn family.

"Part of the culture of Jersey Mike's is giving back to the community. In fact, you can't be a Jersey Mike's franchise owner unless you have that sense of giving back. Everything we do is based on our Christian faith. We try to live by the verse in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that reads, 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.'"



TOP: David Wampler, owner of Jersey Mike's of Abingdon, slices ham for a sub sandwich. All meats, cheeses, onions, tomatoes and lettuce are sliced fresh every day. BOTTOM: Aspen Wood, a server at Jersey Mike's in Abingdon, prepares dozens of subs for customers during a work day.

The owners raised a little over \$6,000 in their first five days to benefit the Kirk Edward Nairn Memorial Scholarship Foundation.

The couple is also participating in the "Month of Giving" during the entire month of March, when their customers will receive incentives to donate to the Wampplers' chosen local charity, Bristol Speedway Children's Charities.

"If customers donate a dollar, we give them a coupon for a dollar off their next purchase," he explained. "For a \$3 donation, they get a coupon for a free bag of chips and a drink. For a \$5 donation, they get a coupon for a free sub on their next visit to Jersey Mike's. It's a no-brainer. They are donating \$5 to a good cause, and they're getting back a sub that costs \$7 or \$8."

Every Jersey Mike's franchisee throughout the country participates in the "Day of Giving," which will be on Wednesday, March 25, this year. On this day, 100% of each store's sales are donated to a local charity. Last year, the nine Tri-Cities Jersey Mike's stores were able to raise over \$42,000 for the local charity.

What is your perfect sub?

The couple agrees they like Sub No. 5, one of the 26 hot and cold subs they serve.

"My favorite has provolone, ham, prosciuttini and cappaciuolo," David said. "By far, one of the best customer favorites is the 'Mike's Famous Philly,' grilled fresh to order with tender steak,

peppers, onions and white American cheese."

Cold subs are served "Mike's Way," which includes lettuce, onions, tomatoes, spices and "The Juice," a blend of red wine vinegar and olive oil.

Other favorites include "Jersey Shore's Favorite," which is stacked with provolone, ham and cappaciuolo. Then there's the "Original Italian," crafted with provolone, ham, prosciuttini, cappaciuolo, salami and pepperoni.

Subs are available in 7-inch and 14.5-inch sizes with regular subs starting at \$6.95. Subs can be purchased alone or as part of a meal with chips and drinks.

'I love what I do'

David was first introduced to a Jersey Mike's restaurant while working at Eastman Chemical Co. in Kingsport as a senior systems analyst.

"I would eat lunch at Jersey Mike's often. I had always wanted to own my own business, but with four daughters to help support, it was hard to leave a secure job."

Turns out, David and a business partner managed to open up a franchise on Bonham Road in Bristol in 2001 while still working at Eastman. Two years later, David bought out his friend's half of the business and retired from Eastman after 31 years of service.

The couple said they could be spending retirement in a more leisurely way. "But that's just not us," said Jeanie.

"The Lord has given you a talent and blessed you with the ability to do things right, so why stop?" David asked.

After that first franchise, the couple gradually accumulated additional Jersey Mike's franchises during the two decades that followed.

When he learned about The Meadows shopping center coming to Abingdon, David jumped at the opportunity to own the Jersey Mike's franchise there.

The entrepreneur said he's always admired the origin of Jersey Mike's. In 1975, Peter Cancro, a 17-year-old high school senior who had worked for Mike's Subs since he was 14 and loved the business, purchased the operation with the help of his football coach. At the time, Peter wasn't even old enough to legally slice a sub.

Over the next decade, Peter opened two other local Mike's Subs stores and continued to build his businesses. In 1987, Peter began franchising the Mike's concept. He changed the name to Jersey Mike's Subs to capture the authenticity of the original store. Today, Peter is CEO of Jersey Mike's Franchise Systems, Inc., headquartered in Manassquan, New Jersey.

"I say this with all sincerity," said the franchise owner. "I love what I do. I never dread coming to work."

It's important that he leave a legacy for his family, he said. Three of his four sons-in-law already work for Jersey Mike's franchises. Even his young grandchildren help out sometimes cleaning tables at the restaurants.

"This is our children's and grandchildren's future."



Editor's note: "Wandering Around Washington" is a regular, exclusive column from Joe Tennis highlighting the untold stories in the county, direct from the people who live and work here. Watch for him to wander into shops, restaurants and parks to bring you the gab and gossip — only in the Washington County News.

Puerto Nuevo restaurant docking in former Harbor

ABINGDON, Va. — Like you, I'm waiting.

That is, we all sadly said bye-bye last year when the Harbor House sailed out of sight along U.S. Highway 11 in Abingdon, Virginia.

And now?

Well, current plans call for opening a new location of Puerto Nuevo at what was once the mighty Harbor House, less than a mile from I-81's Exit 19 in Abingdon.

But wait!

There ain't nothing opening right now with Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam's latest order, telling us all to stay home due to concerns over the coronavirus.

To let you know: Puerto Nuevo is a restaurant hybrid, serving seafood on half the menu and Mexican dishes on the other. It's also part of a chain of restaurants with the same name — with locations in Toccoa, Georgia; Wytheville, Virginia; and Boone, North Carolina.

Just outside of Washington County, you'll find another location of Puerto Nuevo on Linden Drive at Exit 7 in Bristol, Virginia.

As for the upcoming location, well, I noticed several workers there when I pulled into the parking lot on Saturday afternoon.

But its opening is "on hold," said co-owner Felipe Reyes, who lives in Abingdon and tends to a garden to grow peppers and tomatoes to use at the Bristol restaurant.

Like the old Harbor House, Reyes plans to serve seafood whenever the Abingdon location opens.

Whenever.

"Most of our customers come from Abingdon," Reyes said at the Bristol location. "And Abingdon does not have any full set-up restaurant with a nice bar. So we think that will be a good place to be."

The Abingdon location is slated to offer as many seats as the Bristol site: 175, according to Reyes.

"It's bigger," Reyes said, referencing the Harbor House.

"But we're going to save one of those rooms only for special occasions, by reservation."



JOE TENNIS/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Puerto Nuevo is slated to open a new location the former Harbor House Restaurant in Abingdon, a seafood restaurant that closed last October (below).



Down the drain

Dairy farmers hurting with loss of school sales

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON

FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

GLADE SPRING, Va. — Rena Johnson said she and other local dairy farmers were looking forward to getting on better footing in 2020, especially after the dairy industry had suffered less than favorable prices the past four years.

But the onset of COVID-19 is changing all of that.

The novel virus has sickened just about every part of the country's economy, and the dairy industry is no exception.

Milk may have been flying off the grocery store shelves in the last few weeks, but it's still not enough to offset the reduction of milk not being sold to schools and restaurants, many of which have closed throughout the country, according to Johnson, who operates the family-owned Highland Dairy in Glade Spring.

"Right now, there's a big demand for fluid milk in the United States. People are stocking up, and the supply chain cannot keep up.

"I read today that sales are up 33%, and that's unheard of. But it's still not enough to offset our losses," said the young dairy farmer, who took the reins of the farm in 2006 after graduating from Virginia Tech.

"Our last check was down \$1.30 per 100 pounds of milk. Who knows about this coming check?" said Johnson, with hesitation in her voice. "No one knows how low it will go. I guess it just depends on how long the ill effects of the virus last.

"We rely on milk sales to schools a lot," she said, "and now people are not eating out at restaurants unless it's takeout."

Exports of milk are down because of unsettling economy abroad.

"This is a good example of our new global economy," said Andy Overbay, a Smyth County Extension agent.

"An issue, even an isolated one, can upset the markets and affect prices negatively.

"Even though the Southeast is a milk-deficit area — more demand than supply — and our milk goes mostly to fluid use, which garners the highest prices, milk is still priced based on the prices of cheese and butter.

"Cheese and butter prices are down due to lower demand and market uncertainty," said the Extension agent.

Most of the milk produced in the United States stays in this country, with about 15% exported to other countries, such as China and Mexico.

"When those imports of milk slow down," said Johnson, "there goes our prices down even farther."

Johnson said the futures market began to drop in January when the virus hit China, more than a month before the virus even showed up in the United States.

Most of the prices are driven by financial speculators, people who analyze and forecast futures price movement, and trading contracts, she said.

"Now that the virus is here in the United States, things are all out of whack."

The young dairy farmer said the last good year for dairy farms was in 2014 when milk prices were at record highs because of an unprecedented milk demand in countries like China and Russia.

"We were getting \$28 per 100 pounds of milk. We had never had prices like that before."

When the demand fell off, it left the dairy industry with farmers producing more milk than could be exported.

"Our prices were terrible for the following four years," Johnson said. "Our prices dropped down to between \$16 and \$18. Most dairy producers need \$20 per 100 pounds to just break even.

"As a result, we lost hundreds of dairy farms throughout the country that were forced out of business. It's been heartbreaking to see families lose their generations-old farms."

Johnson said, before the coronavirus, everything pointed to a better



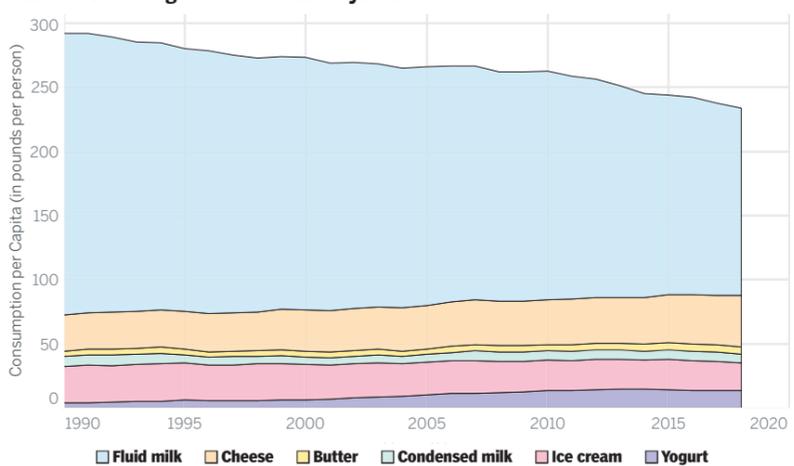
CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS/FILE

A refrigerator in a barn at Highland Dairy in Glade Spring holds an in-line sampler that takes a representative sample of the milk to check it for milk quality and bacteria, fat and protein content.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Many dairy farms have had to cut back production or go out of business altogether due to a shrinking demand in recent years.



SOURCES: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, California Department of Food and Agriculture, USDA Economic Research Service calculations

GRAPHIC BY CHELSEA GILLENWATER/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Dairy farmers were hoping for a better year in 2020, after about four years of price drops, but the coronavirus has driven down restaurant and school sales, which the dairy industry counts on to stay in business. Consumption of fluid milk has gone down steadily for decades.

year of prices in 2020.

Fewer dairy farms are not oversaturating the market, she said.

"Before the virus hit us, we were exporting more milk, and our country was getting trade deals in place with other countries. Everything was looking up. The futures market was rising with indications we would have \$20 to \$21 prices of milk.

"The last couple of months of 2019, we had better prices. We got a little more money in the bank, but that's not going to be there much longer because the first feed bill we get this month will take pretty much all of that," she said with a laugh.

Prices are not the only concern at the local dairy farm.

The farm is being especially careful to clean surfaces that each of their nine employees touch during milking operations.

"Fortunately, this is not a virus that cows contract. Cows get their own form of coronavirus that we vaccinate for.

"But pasteurization of milk kills any virus anyway," said Johnson.

The rise of input costs is also taking a toll on local farms.

"The stuff we have to pay for to keep the farm going must be considered, too. We have to keep the cows fed and pay for hauling costs. It's time to plant corn on the farm," she said. "There are corn seed costs, fertilizer and chemicals to buy.

"I'm afraid this is going to be another bad year for farmers. I'd say we'll see more dairy farms go out because they cannot sustain another year of these prices.

"Thankfully, our farm is holding its own. We're operating on the short term and hoping this setback doesn't last long," said Johnson.

"I hope people keep buying milk. And, don't worry, it's going to get to the stores," she said with a laugh.

"We're still here milking cows."

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