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Watch Now: Amherst County celebrates opening of The Westie, new apartment complex

Justin Faulconer

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The Westie apartments, formerly a school, on Phelps Road in Madison Heights on Thursday.

Kendall Warner photos, The News & Advance

Three decades after students last roamed the halls of the former school on Phelps Road in Madison Heights, a “leap of faith” project to convert the 41,000-square-foot building into apartments was celebrated Thursday as a vision fulfilled.

Waukeshaw Development, the Petersburg company that spent the past two years renovating the structure into 41 apartments, held a grand opening and a tour to showcase the spacious units with high ceilings and chalkboards from former classes. The school closed in 1991 and sat vacant for nearly 30 years while it fell victim to vandalism, attempted arson and theft with deterioration so bad the county's chief building official declared it a public safety hazard in a 2016 letter to a previous owner.

On Thursday, a few dozen attendees, including Amherst County government and business leaders, marveled at the sights of the new apartments with large windows, new countertops, washers and driers in each unit. Waukeshaw Development, which specializes in adaptive reuse of historic structures, entered into a redevelopment lease with the county in 2017.

Dave McCormack, president of Waukeshaw, said the project is 99% complete and expects to begin leasing units next week. The company in 2020 began construction while using historic tax credits and a state grant from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality for environmental remediation work including cleanup and removal of lead and asbestos.

McCormack described the property as one of the more complex projects the company has undertaken considering the building's layout and its vast number of issues.

"I remember the building when it was an absolute disaster," McCormack said. "We called it Biosphere 3 in the auditorium, it was so bad, literally plants growing all over the floor and in the building."

McCormack thanked the Amherst County Board of Supervisors and the Economic Development Authority of Amherst County, referring to county leaders as "visionaries" in helping guide the project through many regulatory issues.

"It really took some super creativity to unwind that and get into this project," McCormack said. "It's come together amazingly well."

The complex showcases a pet-friendly atmosphere including a dog wash area, internal courtyard and plentiful greenspace. Waukeshaw also is working with the county to redevelop a portion of Seminole park behind the building into a dog park serving the entire Amherst community.

Emily Sanfratella, chief operating officer of Waukeshaw, said the project's opening is exciting while recalling memories of walking through the site when the roof was caved in and youth spray-painting graffiti on the walls were chased out.

"It's totally transformed," she said.

Sanfratella said the company has seen a strong demand for pet-friendly units and a major focus is attracting tenants with pets. The facility includes a pet washing station and imagery of dogs adorn some hallways. The units also include features similar to historic properties in downtown Lynchburg within about a mile across the James River.

"We think our property can stand up next to any of those," Sanfratella said of the quality of the units.

Jennifer Moore, chairperson of the Amherst County's board of supervisors, attended elementary school in the building and said she is excited for its comeback.

"There are countless memories from the community about what has happened at the location here," Moore said.

She said when she first joined the board in January 2017 the county's options were demolishing the building for half a million dollars or taking a chance on a developer, describing the choice as a leap of faith.

"In my mind, saving the historical building, increasing housing options for the community, it was the right decision," Moore said of the county supporting the project. "I've gotten to see life grow back into the walls, the grounds here. It has been

a complete transformation. I think about the potential memories for the people to come.”

Moore said new water lines also recently have been put into the neighborhood and the future dog park is an attraction that will draw more people to Madison Heights.

Calvin Kennon, of the Amherst EDA, said prior to Waukeshaw’s involvement the site was studied and prospects for future use seemed hopeless.

“It’s great to see this building come back to life,” Kennon said.

He complimented Waukeshaw and McCormack for seeing the project through.

“I think his work speaks for itself. He’s done it over and over again,” Kennon said.

“Instead of having a hopeless situation, we’re going to have a place for families and a place to grow. It’s going to bring jobs, it’s going to bring economic growth to an area that needs it.”

The project is \$7 million, according to the company’s website. Waukeshaw also purchased Winton Country Club from the county in early 2019 and operates it as Winton Farm.

The company in 2017 also purchased the former Amherst Milling Co., a historic mill on Union Hill Road in the town of Amherst, and is redeveloping it into a brewery and restaurant called Camp Trapezium. McCormack said the opening of the restored mill is planned for this summer.

County Administrator Dean Rodgers described Waukeshaw as an excellent development partner for the county. The Westie is a first step to bringing a renaissance to Madison Heights, he said.

“The Westie will be a strong tax revenue generator and the fact that we were able to preserve the building is so meaningful to this community,” Rodgers said. “This truly is a win-win.”

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/watch-now-hot-spot-for-a-cold-one-as-amherst-celebrates-camp-trapeziums-opening-in/article_e22135f4-ca29-11eb-a839-6f16eb28ca66.html

Watch Now: Hot spot for a cold one as Amherst celebrates Camp Trapezium's opening in historic mill

Justin Faulconer

Jun 11, 2021



Community members clap for Bill Wydner during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for Camp Trapezium in Amherst on June 11, 2021, where Trapezium now is housed for decades.

Kendall Warner photos, New Era-Progress

The owner of the Camp Trapezium brewery and Amherst town and business leaders on Thursday celebrated the official grand opening of the new brewery and restaurant.

Waukeshaw Development, Inc., the Petersburg company that purchased the historic Amherst Milling Company structure in 2017, has spent several years repurposing the historic landmark into a facility that sells craft beer and brick-oven pizza. The brewery is located at 140 Union Hill Road in Amherst.

Dave McCormack, president of Waukeshaw, said the restoration has been one of the "craziest," most emotional and beautiful renovations the company has ever done. He referenced the previous owners, the Wydner family, and Bill Wydner, who attended the grand opening celebration and spoke with folks inside the structure he spent countless hours in over the decades.

"This has amazing stories and I want to thank Bill for telling them all to us," McCormack said. "I'm still learning so much. I'm now the guy who has to tell all the stories to the people who come here and that's a serious challenge."

McCormack said he is glad to join a chain of owners of the former mill dating back to the 1800s.

"It's so beautiful," he said of the building's many features. "I'm so happy to be the steward of this thing."

McCormack said he hopes the site becomes a destination and a draw for Amherst County, especially for craft beer and history lovers in the Lynchburg region with its nearby Brew Ridge Trail and Nelson County's Virginia 151 corridor ripe with breweries.

Amherst Mayor Dwayne Tuggle said many town and county residents are excited about coming back to the structure and reliving memories of the old mill in its heyday while enjoying pizza and a beer.

"There's excitement around town," Tuggle said. "They've been talking about it."

Sabrina Kennon, president of the Amherst County Chamber of Commerce, said the opening is a great way to celebrate the repurposing and revitalization of a major local landmark.

Town Manager Sara Carter said one of the highlights in her tenure, which began several months after Waukeshaw bought the old mill four years ago, is observing the rebirth of an iconic structure — one of the last working mills in Virginia.

"We're so glad to see this building maintained and taken to its next place and to be taken care of so well," Carter said. "It's a pleasure and I'm thrilled to see it open."

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/amherst-county-votes-down-pari-mutuel-wagering/article_8b65f172-3cb2-11ec-9ce7-0b428a25ea6d.html

Amherst County votes down pari-mutuel wagering

Justin Faulconer

Nov 3, 2021



"I Voted" stickers were given out Nov. 2 at Amelon Elementary School in Madison Heights. Amherst County voters said no to a referendum that would have allowed a Rosie's Gaming Emporium to set up in Madison Heights. Election results showed 54% were against the referendum and 46% favored it.

Lee Luther Jr. photo, for the New Era-Progress

Amherst County voters have shot down a referendum that would have allowed a Rosie's Gaming Emporium to set up in Madison Heights.

The referendum on pari-mutuel wagering was legally required to pass for the business to come to fruition. It stirred debate in the county in recent months, with supporters saying it would have brought needed jobs and tax revenue, and opponents saying it would lead to gambling addiction and more crime.

Unofficial election results on the Virginia Department of Elections website were updated Wednesday morning to add nearly 3,000 in-person early votes and more than 1,000 absentee ballots to the totals. Still outstanding were results from mailed absentee ballots received by the deadline and processed after Election Day.

With the latest figures in hand, 7,211 votes, or 54.06%, were against the referendum, and 6,127 votes, or 45.94%, favored it.

Ernie Dellaverson, regional manager of Rosie's who has spent much time in Amherst County lobbying, said company officials will collect data, gather thoughts and come up with a strategy in determining what's next.

On the large number of "no" votes, he added: "It blows my mind."

Tobey Thurston, an organizer of the group Amherst Citizens Against Rosie's, said she was pleasantly shocked the referendum didn't pass.

"I'm glad, I'm happy," Thurston said, adding she wants to see the voters' decision bring closure. "I hope there's no loophole the county has up its sleeve."

She said the rejection at the ballot box sends a message it is not the kind of business the community wants. The group of 700 people raised \$5,000, advertised against Rosie's coming to Amherst and made an impact against a company with deeper pockets in the area of lobbying, she said.

Thurston has said she would rather her local real estate taxes go up than the county getting tax revenue through a business that thrives on gambling.

Drew Wade, who was elected Tuesday as the new District 5 board of supervisors member, represents the area the company in which the company attempted to locate. He wasn't in favor of it coming to Madison Heights, citing long-term negative effects he believes it would bring to the county.

Wade also publicly said in September, prior to the Amherst County Board of Supervisors adopting a resolution supporting Rosie's establishing in the county, that the board shouldn't sway the citizens' vote and should remain neutral. The resolution passed 3-0 with a member abstaining and another absent.

Amherst County Supervisor Jimmy Ayers, who supports Rosie's, said the citizens of Amherst County will suffer a long time financially because of the decision to turn the company away. The board will likely have no choice but to go to taxpayers for revenue in a wide range of county decisions, including the real estate tax, he said.

The money has to come from somewhere for projects such as a major addition planned for Amherst County High School, he said, and Rosie's presence in the business community would have helped.

"That's one clear message that was delivered, the majority of folks do not care where the tax rates go," Ayers said.

Victoria Hanson, executive director of the Amherst County Economic Development Authority, said the county needs the estimated tax revenue of about \$1.9 million annually through gaming, sales, meals, real estate and personal property taxes. She said county officials will be faced with making more difficult financial decisions.

"Losing Rosie's is a wasted opportunity for Madison Heights and Amherst County. Good government services our community wants and needs — such as schools, police, ambulances, etc. — require money from taxes. ... The County budget is already strained and without the revenue from Rosie's either taxes will have to be raised or government services reduced," Hanson said in a statement.

EDA officials also have said it would bring a much needed facelift to the Seminole Plaza shopping center and enhance development and revitalization efforts in Madison Heights.

Frank Campbell, a former District 5 representative, said he supported Rosie's coming to the county based on new jobs and bringing a needed economic boost. The county has a void that Rosie's would have helped fill, he said in a recent interview.

Supervisor Claudia Tucker, one of the three supervisors to formally back Rosie's, said publicly in September rejecting it sends a message to other businesses they are not welcome in Amherst, which she doesn't want to see. She also said residents who voted against it shouldn't complain to her if their taxes go up.

Rosie's officials have said nearly 100 new jobs and more than \$1 million in annual revenue would have come with the business building a new facility in the Seminole Plaza shopping center. It would feature "crime deterrents" such as significant outside lighting, extensive surveillance and private security workers if built, the company has said.

Rosie's pari-mutuel wagering is through off-track betting and historical horse raising machines that look and feel like traditional slot machines but are based on previously run horse races, according to the company. Colonial Downs Group, the owner and operator of Rosie's that runs a thoroughbred horse racing track in New Kent County, hasn't lost a referendum to pursue a new facility prior to this week, company officials said in a recent interview.

Rosie's has locations in New Kent, Vinton, Richmond, Dumfries and Hampton. A pari-mutuel wagering referendum for a Rosie's in Emporia passed with more than 60% of the vote Tuesday, according to unofficial election results.

Sherri Temple, an Amherst town resident who voted in its favor, said she had been looking forward to the business improving Madison Heights.

"I hate that this is happening," Temple said of its rejection.

She said she believes county taxpayers will suffer in the long run if county officials are faced with raising taxes and development opportunities are squandered.

"They don't understand basic economics," she said of Rosie's detractors.

Wade said the turnout against Rosie's shows morals are a factor and the jobs promised would have come with "strings attached." He is pleased with the outcome and said he strives to help the county manage its financial resources without raising taxes on the citizens.

"The people spoke," Wade said.

Dallverson said his goal was to educate people, many of whom had never been in an environment such as Rosie's before.

"It's the fear of the unknown," he said of the push against it. "I believe the naysayers won through a religious campaign."

He said the company definitely will look elsewhere.

"I'm sure [Amherst County] leadership doesn't want that to happen but we are limited in the licenses we have. We have other jurisdictions interested in our product."

He said Rosie's would have been a great fit for Amherst County and brought much-needed improvement to the Madison Heights shopping center.

"I feel so bad for Amherst County, how they lost out," he said. "Literally lost out."