

Old Lynchburg fire station becomes themed Airbnb

Rachael Smith

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The kitchen at Firehouse 4 Venue as seen on Friday, Aug. 20, 2021.

Kendall Warner The News & Advance

Inside the garage of the firehouse, a 1956 pumper and ladder combination fire truck from Glasgow Volunteer Fire Department is the newest addition to the Fire Station 4 Airbnb on Rivermont Avenue.

The restored truck still runs but didn't fit inside the Glasgow department so the Woodland family opened up his home to it recently.

Tim Woodland and his wife, Shannon, purchased the circa-1905 fire station at 1210 Rivermont Ave. adjacent from the Exxon station at the corner of Bedford Avenue in 2018. The couple has been renting out the bottom as a short-term rental since May 2020.

“We took off like grease lightning,” Woodland said. “People were sick of being isolated and kept inside and they wanted to get out. Lynchburg is a great place for hiking and outdoor activities and it really took off.”

The Woodlands, who moved to the area in 2017 from the Tidewater region, moved into the upstairs portion of the 7,700 square-foot, two-story structure in the fall of 2018.

Behind the fire truck are donated fire helmets and gear that he encourages guests to try on and take photos of to share with him, which he then hangs on a wall in the garage.

Woodland, who retired after 30 years with the Chesapeake Fire Department, drove past the station on Rivermont for the first time and “nearly snapped” his neck.

In its glory days, the firehouse ran two teams of horses and fire apparatus into area neighborhoods.

The fire station was in use until September 1991 when a new Fire Station 4 was built at 410 Birch Street that same year less than a mile away.

The city sold the vacant fire station to Tony Gambone in 1993 for \$20,000. Gambone, an electrician, rewired the entire building and lived there.

In 2004, Nancy Marion purchased the building for \$90,300 from an auction, according to Lynchburg GIS, and did the majority of the painting and renovations inside.

For the next 14 years, the building was occupied by the Marions, who lived on the second floor for a few years before building lofts to rent out to their children and eventually to college students.

Today, Woodland primarily uses the downstairs for Airbnb rentals but occasionally has opened the garage for weddings and other small events. The Airbnb can sleep three people but can fit more with an air mattress, he said.

“The Airbnb is set up to look like just an old firehouse,” Woodland said. “It even has a log book for people to write in and leave notes. People just love the space.”

He said little work was done to the firehouse except some painting, new ceiling fans and new light fixtures.

The living space with 13-foot ceilings also is known as the middle bay, where horses originally were housed. It also is home of the 65-foot hose drying tower.

A large firehouse kitchen sits adjacent to the living space, as well as a full bathroom with firefighting memorabilia.

The Lynchburg Fire Department has equipment, parts of an old fire truck and photos on at the Airbnb for guests to enjoy.

“Things are here to be handled, taken out of the cabinets to take a look at and to be enjoyed,” Woodland said.

Other memorabilia includes firefighter patches from all over the country that have been donated to Woodland, helmets, photos, the original phone from the firehouse and one large sign hanging above the bed that a buddy of Woodland donated to him after he closed his restaurant.

The vast majority of guests don't tend to use the kitchen, which still is in its original state, Woodland said.

“Most people are here for one night,” he said. “People are traveling south to north or north to south and Lynchburg seems to be a great stopping point.”

He said he gets a lot of parents of college students who come to stay while visiting their children.

There is a 1950s television on top of the refrigerator making it look exactly the way it would have when the firehouse was in operation.

The cabinets are original but Woodland added a new sink and faucet, as well as a double oven.

Woodland said his wife Shannon did most of the landscaping outside with a garden, bistro table, towering trees and a fence separating guests from the business of Rivermont Avenue.

“We just hope people enjoy the space,” he said.

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/lynchburg-area-businesses-adjust-to-higher-minimum-wage/article_3dfcd520-c482-11eb-a283-537e82eebd5c.html

Lynchburg-area businesses adjust to higher minimum wage

Rachael Smith

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Riley Campbell puts a pair of pants on a hanger to restock a rack at Something Else Boutique in River Ridge Mall on Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

It's been a little more than a month since Virginia increased its minimum wage, and while some workers are making more money, small business owners say it comes with a cost — and usually that is passed onto the consumer.

The hourly minimum wage in Virginia increased from the federally mandated minimum of \$7.25 per hour to \$9.50 per hour on May 1. The minimum wage will gradually increase to \$11 on Jan. 1, 2022 and to \$12 on Jan. 1, 2023, according to legislation passed last year. It could reach \$15 per hour by 2026 if the General Assembly approves it.

At Elizabeth's Early Learning Center at 2320 Bedford Ave., the only source of income is tuition, so when minimum wage went up, so did tuition, Executive Director Jane Gerdy said.

Although no teachers were at minimum wage, Gerdy said, raising the wages of lower-paid employees to the new minimum led to raising other employees' wages as well, necessitating a tuition increase.

"It hasn't had any consequences yet because there's still a big demand for child care. I don't think we've lost any enrollment because of that," Gerdy said.

She said she feels bad about increasing tuition because of the effect it has on families but she said she didn't have a choice. The tuition will rise again when the minimum wage rises to \$11 next year. Gerdy said the tuition went up by \$5 per week this year.

As a nonprofit, Gerdy said there aren't large profits the day care center can dip into to cover additional costs.

"That all has to be passed on to families and child care is already very expensive," she said.

Jenee Welsh, owner of Something Else Boutique inside River Ridge mall, said she has always paid more than the minimum wage to her employees, but not drastically more.

Most of them were making about \$8.50 per hour and managers were making \$10 or \$12 per hour.

“Because it’s retail, my jobs are not meant to support a household,” she said. “These are jobs for high school kids, college kids or stay-at-home moms who just want something to do 20 hours a week.”

What many people don’t understand, she said, is that when the pay increases, so do payroll taxes.

“So the minimum wage may have gone up a couple dollars an hour but in all reality it’s going to end up costing me about four to five more dollars an hour,” she said.

“Money doesn’t come from nowhere. It has to come from somewhere.”

That means there will be an increase in price for the product, an increase for when she orders from wholesalers who also are paying their employees more, so they have to charge Welsh more to make up for that increase.

She said when the minimum wage goes up next year, the cost will just be passed onto the customer.

“People can keep pushing and pushing and pushing for that but they’re going to pay for it,” she said. “So sure, you’re going to make more money, but the cost of everything is going to go up, so, in reality, you’re going to make the same amount of money as before.”

Additionally, she won’t be overlapping staff members anymore. On Saturdays, she typically had multiple employees working at a time but won’t be doing that now.

“So what’s going to happen is now people are going to be upset, which you’re already seeing it in the restaurant business. You’re seeing it at fast food restaurants. People are upset that they’re waiting longer. And that’s because supply and demand is not going to meet with how much it costs to staff,” she said.

Debbie Miller, owner of Bloom by Doyle’s, a florist, said she already was paying her employees above minimum wage because she knows how expensive it is to just put gas in their cars.

“I’m also a realist. I mean, I know that the more things go up, the more likely my delivery fee will have to go up or my flowers will; it is a trickle effect,” she said. “If wages continue to climb, money has to come from somewhere. Everything is touched by some worker. Shipping prices go up, not to mention labor wages on flower farms and processing of flowers and shipping them here. The reality is everything will go up, just to offset and maintain that whole flow.”

She said she doesn’t mind paying more to a great team player at the flower shop who goes above and beyond with customers and has a good attitude.

“I’m happy to pay more for that type of person,” she said.

Dave Henderson, owner of The Water Dog at 1016 Jefferson St., said the change hardly affected his staff at all since all already were paid above the minimum wage.

“People need to make a living wage and a living wage is different from minimum wage,” he said. “Minimum wage is what the federal government believes is the bare minimum that someone with like no kids can live off of and that’s just not true. Anything we can do to get you toward that living wage is fine with me.”

Henderson has taken payroll one step further and has begun a revenue-share program with his back of the house staff.

“We pay competitive rates but in addition to that we will be giving them a percentage of revenue that hits a certain threshold,” he said.

He said the new payment program will take place over the next pay period.

The struggle to hire is real: Lynchburg-area businesses seeking more employees but coming up short as COVID restrictions lighten

Rachael Smith

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Jessie Mickles cleans the counter at the Texas Inn on Friday.

Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

Many businesses in the area are having trouble hiring right now — it's a problem across every sector, from retail to restaurants and manufacturing, according to Tim Saunders, business engagement and outreach coordinator for Virginia Career Works.

“I talked to a restaurant owner in Bedford last week who said he waited three weeks to receive just one application for an opening in his kitchen,” he said. “Sam Moore Furniture is trying to fill around 20 openings at its Bedford factory. Liberty University has a quite a few openings for contact center agents. Frito-Lay has taken the step of advertising its openings on digital billboards around the area.”

The Central Virginia Workforce Development Board creates and sustains connections between businesses and job seekers through a statewide network of employment professionals.

Saunders held a job fair two weeks ago for the Concentrix call center on Old Forest Road, as it are trying to fill more than 80 customer service positions.

“We advertised the event on television, shared flyers with our partners, and sent direct messages to more than 7,000 people,” he said. “Despite those efforts, only 13 people showed up to apply for positions during the three-day job fair event.”

Saunders said some employers are offering incentives to attract applicants such as sign-on bonuses for maintenance workers, seasonal employees and other jobs.

He said he can't point to one reason alone to explain the difficulty employers are experiencing with hiring right now but believes a number of factors are driving the issue.

“I do expect our employers to see more applicants when the state brings back the work search requirement for unemployment claimants in early June,” he said.

The Virginia Employment Commission announced earlier in April that jobless workers collecting unemployment benefits will be required to report looking for work beginning in early June.

As of right now, between 1,600 and 1,700 people in the Lynchburg area are filing weekly unemployment claims, Tim Saunders said.

“I am already talking with employers about the possibility of holding job fairs in late May and early June, to accommodate the expected increase in applicants and hopefully connect job seekers with good opportunities,” he said.

The Texas Inn is seeking all positions, including cooks, servers, and prep staff.

“The majority of our problems right now are directly related to COVID shutdown, 50% capacity and the stimulus packages,” said owner Dave Saunders.

He had 29 employees across the two locations — one downtown and another in Cornerstone — and when COVID-19 hit last spring, he went to having only 12.

“When in-store dining opened back up and we were allowed to have diners in, we added back employees fairly rapidly,” he said.

He said he doesn't blame anyone for living off the stimulus package or unemployment benefits but said it's made hiring an extremely difficult process.

“So our salary for preps and cooks has gone up and our hourly rate has gone up significantly more; however, it's gone up everywhere else as well,” Saunders said. “Our hourly rate for certain positions have increased by more than 25%.”

He said there is a high competition for the labor pool and other larger companies may be able to advertise for positions and can pay higher wages but it's the smaller, independent companies that are facing the brunt right now.

“It's a double whammy. We're paying more in wages than ever and getting less in revenue because the government has cut our business in half,” he said.

Saunders said forward-seeking job hunters should go out now and find the job they want because once enhanced unemployment benefits run out, there will be fewer jobs and more job seekers.

“If you get a job now and hang on to it, you’ll be a good position,” he said. “The end is nigh, it’s coming, and it’s going to be a gold rush to try and find jobs when the dynamics switch.”

The Academy Center of the Arts at 600 Main St. was forced to cut about 25% of its payroll last summer as part of a massive expense reduction to get through the year. Now it’s in the process of hiring for those positions that require public engagement as summer concert series and education programming ramps back up.

Geoff Kershner, executive director at the Academy, said he has received many applications for an open graphic designer position, along with a few others, and he speculates people are enticed to work at the center because of its unique venue and exciting programming.

“Especially for the front-of-house positions, I think because of the uniqueness of the hours that are kind of flexible and different, I’m not hearing that we’re having those issues or problems,” he said.

A new job the Academy is hiring for due to COVID-19 is for its new mobile arts unit launching this year. The unit is a converted school bus that will go into the community to provide art instruction.

“It was kind of in the works pre-COVID, but we really committed to it because it’s something we know now has a future,” he said. “Because it’s a mobile unit we can do things outside and we’re not restricted by the enclosures on our campus. And that program is a bit of a product of the moment.”

The Water Dog is hiring for all positions at its restaurant at 1016 Jefferson St., but mostly because this is its peak season.

Dave Henderson, owner of The Water Dog, said just like any other business owner, he is relying on good weather to bring more customers in.

“I think the challenge for us is that we’re also coming out of this pandemic to a degree,” he said.

With that in mind, more customers are ready to dine out, which calls for increased staff at area restaurants.

Henderson said it’s not just about the atmosphere and the work culture for prospective applicants, it’s also about the bottom line financially.

“People need to make a living wage and The Water Dog is 100% for the increase of minimum wage because it’s getting it’s getting individuals who need those increases one step closer to a living wage,” Henderson said, referring to the minimum wage which is set to increase to \$9.50 on May 1.

Simplimatic Automation in Forest is hiring for a purchasing agent and buyer, a junior buyer and expediter and stockroom clerks.

Lee Crawford, marketing manager, said for the most part, these are positions the company would normally be hiring for, except for stockroom clerks.

“We probably would have those filled if not for the pandemic,” he said.

He said the positions have gotten applicants but some have been under- or over-qualified and some people are making more money through unemployment.

“But we are seeing an uptick in people applying for jobs,” he said. “I don’t think a lot of people are sitting by. I think they are trying to get back into it. People are ready to get back to normal.”