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Watch Now: Madison Heights barbers, sisters reflect on shutdown and reopening during COVID-19

Justin Faulconer

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Ellen Sprouse (right) cuts the hair of Al Watts on Wednesday while working alongside her sister, Alexia Campbell, as Lee Luther Jr. photos, For The News & Advance

During the shutdown from COVID-19 last spring, Amherst County resident Vance Wilkins addressed his desperate need for a haircut during an outdoor gathering.

“I haven’t had sideburns this long since Elvis Presley was in style,” the chairman of the Amherst County Republican Committee said at the May tailgate event.

Wilkins wasn’t alone. Many area residents opted for longer locks as statewide restrictions were enacted in response to the pandemic and many businesses, barbershops among them, temporarily had to close.

Ellen Sprouse and Alexia Campbell, sisters and barbers at Cut-N-Up in Madison Heights, were excited to meet the public’s hair and beauty needs when given the go-ahead last May to reopen after a two-month hiatus.

“I would have considered us an essential business because I saw some really bad haircuts,” Sprouse said with a laugh.

The barbershop on the corner of U.S. 29 Business and Dixie Airport Road was among many local businesses to feel the effects during the pandemic-driven shutdown which took effect last March.

“It was hard,” Sprouse said of the time off. “Fortunately enough, I’ve been self-employed for 31 years. I’ve learned to save for a rainy day.”

With the figurative monsoon in full swing last spring, Campbell said the two did some improvements to the shop they had planned for a while. Sprouse made masks for a local printing company to help offset the revenue loss from the barbershop and also tackled some projects at home during quarantine.

“It felt good,” Sprouse said of reopening. “There were a lot of mixed emotions about the laws and regulations. We’re still instructed to wear the mask while we’re performing a service and the customer is required to wear a mask. Even after a year, there’s some issues with that with some.”

Campbell said another major change was having to book appointments rather than walk-ins, a first for the shop that is helpful in maintaining social distancing.

“Customers are still getting used to it, but it’s worked out,” Campbell said. “It limits the amount of people who are sitting around in here too.”

Another adjustment is they cannot trim beards because of the face mask requirement, Campbell said.

Sprouse said booking appointments also helps keep track of customers in case someone has been exposed to the virus or tested positive, in keeping with state guidelines. Sprouse and Campbell sterilize the seats and wipe down door handles and the waiting area, a process that takes a couple of extra minutes but isn’t an inconvenience, according to the sisters.

The business is in its 19th year and this month marked a decade of operating in its current location. Sprouse said lots of prayer and the community’s support helped get them through a challenging time.

“For weeks, you couldn’t buy an appointment,” Campbell said of the steady flow of customers when business returned. “People were so excited we were back open.”

One positive outcome from the pandemic was having more time to spend with family, Sprouse said. Manley Butler, their father, has helped book appointments and runs a shoeshine business within the shop, which the sisters said has been a huge help.

“And my shoes stay shined now,” Sprouse said.

While making conversation with customers in the past nine months, Sprouse said they’ve heard stories of the virus affecting some hard with personal losses and others experiencing mild symptoms or not getting sick during quarantine even after family members tested positive.

Campbell said she wouldn’t cut hair during the shutdown out of loyalty to the customers undergoing hardships, including not getting a haircut. “If I couldn’t [cut] theirs, I wasn’t cutting anybody’s,” Campbell said.

“We feel like they’re family,” Sprouse said. “We love every one of them.”

https://newsadvance.com/community/new_era_progress/news/amherst-supervisors-voice-support-for-rosies-locating-in-madison-heights/article_cbc99918-05ac-11ec-99e3-cf7a32a20385.html

Amherst supervisors voice support for Rosie's locating in Madison Heights

Justin Faulconer

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This rendering gives an idea of what a Rosie's Gaming Emporium would look like from the front. A referendum in play for Amherst County would, if passed, pave the way for a new entertainment facility in the Seminole Plaza shopping center next to Big Lots.

RENDERING PROVIDED BY ROSIE'S GAMING EMPORIUM

Less than three months before Amherst County voters decide on a referendum that could pave the way for Rosie's Gaming Emporium to build a facility in Madison Heights, the county's board of supervisors is voicing support for the business.

During an Aug. 23 retreat at Sweet Briar College, board members said they favor drafting a formal statement of county government support for the project in September. Owned and operated by Virginia-based Colonial Downs Group, Rosie's has opened six locations in Virginia since 2019, including New Kent County, Richmond, Vinton, Dumfries, Collinsville and Hampton.

Aaron Gomes, chief operations officer of Peninsula Pacific Entertainment, said the Richmond company plans to build a new facility in the Seminole Plaza shopping center next to Big Lots, an estimated \$40 million project that would feature historical horse racing machines, a restaurant and bar. The off-track betting facility is for ages 18 and up, according to its website.

The business's potential presence in Amherst County has stirred debate among residents, with supporters citing added tax revenue and a needed business boost in Madison Heights while detractors point to concerns about gambling addiction and effects they feel are detrimental to the community. A referendum on pari-mutuel wagering is on the ballot for county voters to weigh in during the Nov. 2 election.

Claudia Tucker, of the Amherst County Board of Supervisors, said she favors a statement of support from the board on Rosie's coming to the county. She said she doesn't want Amherst County to miss out on a major business that could help economic development efforts thrive.

"We have an opportunity that may never come back," Tucker said.

Gomes said a Rosie's in Madison Heights is set to bring 100 jobs paying a minimum of \$15 an hour and a tax revenue stream of \$1.9 million to Amherst County from gaming, sales, meals, real estate and personal property taxes. The average customer spends about \$50 while visiting for entertainment, including historic racing games, food and drinks, and the business also includes live horse betting and a gift shop, according to Gomes.

He said the emporium would be well-protected with security staff and cameras and he encourages residents to visit one to see firsthand a “very safe, friendly, fun atmosphere.”

Supervisor Jimmy Ayers said he just fielded a phone call from a resident concerned with the addictive nature a pari-mutuel gaming emporium would bring to the county. Ayers asked what control the county government has over ABC stores or the sale of liquor in the county as far as its effects.

“It’s all about choice and people taking initiative to be educated themselves about what it is,” Ayers said of Rosie’s.

He said board members constantly hear from residents that “we want this, we want that” in terms of business development and they lose sight of the costs involved.

“What do we do as a board when we want [Amherst County] to grow?” Ayers said.

He said Rosie’s Gaming Emporium is a legitimate business that has upheld commitments to localities in which it has located and is willing to invest in a project that would bring needed tax revenue that better positions the board to not have to increase real estate taxes on residents.

“If they don’t do business in Amherst County, they are going to do it in Central Virginia somewhere,” Ayers said. “If we don’t get tax revenue from our businesses, it is going to have to come from [residents].”

Gomes said another benefit Amherst would receive from the business is a draw of visitors from other localities. Amherst County officials routinely have spoken of needed opportunities and incentives to draw people from across the James River rather than watching development and projects go to Lynchburg and Forest.

Ayers said the financial boost from Rosie’s would also aid funding public infrastructure expansion the county desperately needs.

“These folks will help us do that,” Ayers said.

County Administrator Dean Rodgers added: “They have a constitutional right to be here.”

https://newsadvance.com/community/new_era_progress/news/watch-now-amherst-residents-make-case-for-against-rosies-as-vote-tallies-near/article_46a22b7c-252f-11ec-9be7-dbb5e6160a6c.html

Watch Now: Amherst residents make case for, against Rosie's as vote tallies near

Justin Faulconer

Oct 6, 2021



This rendering gives an idea of what a Rosie's Gaming Emporium would look like from the air.

PROVIDED, ROSIE'S GAMING EMPORIUM

The intense debate over a Rosie's Gaming Emporium locating in Amherst County, which has drawn both support and opposition, was on full display Sept. 30 in Madison Heights.

A Rosie's campaign office in the Seminole Plaza shopping center, where Colonial Downs Group plans to build a new facility, opened that afternoon, drawing in a stream of residents. Meanwhile, a few miles north on U.S. 29 Business, a meeting rallying opposition to the business coming to Madison Heights was held at Temple Baptist Church that same evening.

The two contrasting scenes capture the choice Amherst County voters have in front of them this election: a yes or no vote on a referendum on the ballot for pari-mutuel wagering, a measure that must pass before Colonial Downs proceeds with constructing the estimated \$40 million facility.

Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, spoke during the rally at Temple Baptist. In addressing the fight against commercialized gambling, he described a yes vote as an act of greed and a no vote as a gesture of love for the Amherst community.

"The struggle in Amherst County is a conflict between love and greed," Bernal said. "We believe people are worth more than money."

Sherri Temple, an Amherst resident who already has voted yes to the referendum in early voting, has a much different outlook. She said the tax revenue Amherst County would get, which Rosie's officials have said is estimated at as much as \$1.9 million annually, is much needed in boosting the local tax base and easing the burden on property owners who pay real estate taxes.

"I think it's a form of entertainment that we don't have," said Temple. "I think adults need something in this area. The tax revenue ... how could that not be a good thing?"

Pari-mutuel wagering at a glance

According to Rosie's material, pari-mutuel wagering consists of players competing against each other rather than the house through off-track betting and historical horse racing machines that look and feel like traditional slot machines but are based on previously run horse races.

Colonial Downs Group owns and operates the Colonial Downs thoroughbred horseracing track in New Kent County.

Pari-mutuel wagering already is happening across Virginia in Rosie's locations in New Kent, Vinton, Richmond, Dumfries and Hampton. The revenue Rosie's generates comes from gaming, sales, meals, real estate and business personal property taxes.

Weighing the costs

Bernal told the crowd of roughly 100 gathered during the Temple Baptist meeting that Rosie's, as a government-sanctioned facility if the referendum passes, would have negative effects on their neighbors, family members and co-workers as "a monument of greed" that would cause many to squander their money in a business exchange mathematically stacked against them.

"It's inevitable you're going to lose your money, especially if you keep doing it," Bernal said. "These guys are not your best friend. They'll exploit you for all you're worth. This is the essence of a big con."

Pamphlets distributed at the rally stated studies confirm the majority of tax revenue such operations generate comes from gambling addicts who lose money on slot machine-like games and is not worth the cost in human suffering.

Temple said she believes the majority of the Amherst County Board of Supervisors was right in passing a resolution of support for Rosie's a few weeks prior. Vice Chair David Pugh abstained because he said he didn't think the board should sway the referendum and Chair Jennifer Moore was absent from the vote; the three supervisors who backed the resolution spoke favorably of the economic benefits the business brings.

"I was glad that they did," said Temple. "It gives you a little more confidence that your board of supervisors is saying this is a good thing for the county."

Tobey Thurston, an Amherst resident and organizer in the group Amherst Citizens Against Rosie's, said the facility would bring nothing but heartache to the Amherst community.

"As a property owner in Amherst County, I would rather my taxes go up than have a Rosie's," Thurston said. "There's other ways to do things. Just because something is profitable doesn't mean you should do it."

Thurston said she's concerned the business would generate more crime, drunk driving, public intoxication and other negative effects the community doesn't need.

Frank Campbell, a Madison Heights resident and former Amherst County Board of Supervisors member who served the District 5 seat, attended the Rosie's campaign office opening Sept. 30. He said he would have supported the resolution if still serving on the board and said he looks forward to the business opening its doors in the district he formerly represented from 2010 to 2013.

Having a major business come in and invest in the community with tax revenue, jobs and another dining option is beneficial, Campbell said.

"The business growth in Amherst County has been stagnant for years," Campbell said. "There's going to be more businesses that follow Rosie's. Some people say it's going to bring crime. We have crime. We have dilapidated properties in Amherst County that has been a blight for crime for years. This, I think, it's a way to get out of that."

Bernal said the opposition goes beyond a resident having a poker game in his house. "This is predatory gambling. It's like a wolf after the sheep," he said of a business setting up pari-mutuel activities with government support. "They want to get the weak in our community to fork over their money."

None of the board of supervisors attended the rally. County Administrator Dean Rodgers, who has publicly spoken in support of Rosie's, attended to observe and Drew Wade, who is running unopposed for the District 5 seat that Moore will step

down from at the end of the year, was in attendance.

During the board's Sept. 17 meeting, Wade spoke publicly on the matter and said he doesn't support Rosie's coming to the district but he respects others' opinions. He urged residents to do their own research on issue that will have far-reaching effects and felt supervisors should remain neutral.

"Let the people choose without weight from the board," Wade said at the September meeting.

Closing arguments

Bernal, who said he is in the fight against predatory gambling "to the bitter end," said Amherst residents would be hurt financially and described the operation as an "an incredible rip-off" and a money grab disguised as economic development. He repeatedly called it a casino, but Rosie's material at the campaign office open house said it is not a casino since it features historical horse racing machines only and not table games such as poker, blackjack and craps.

Bernal said far more gambling addicts than jobs will be left in wake of Rosie's if it moves forward.

"The business model is based on addictive gamblers," said Bernal, adding the project financially exploits residents. "They're considered expendable...the community suffers, the families suffer. Even the winners suffer because their community is going in the tank."

Rosie's material at the open house said the facility is an entertainment destination that will bring nearly 100 new jobs.

"Whatever floats your boat," said Campbell of pari-mutuel wagering. "I personally don't do a lot of that, but I don't fault the folks who do."

Terry Hunter, a county resident who attended the Rosie's event, said he enjoys any business development in Amherst.

“I look at all business as a positive for the community,” Hunter said. “This can be a new hub of activity and hopefully expand to the rest of the county. I think it would be a wonderful addition to the county.”

Ernie Dellaverson, regional manager of Rosie’s who oversees its Vinton location, urged county residents to contact town officials in Vinton, visit that site and see for themselves how it operates with a focus on security and community partnerships. The Seminole Plaza center is an excellent location and would be vastly improved if the referendum passes, he said.

“I think there’s a lot of business volume that can be done by fixing this place up, bringing in a Rosie’s and it will probably drive additional business to Big Lots and other leaseholders here as well,” Dallaverson said.

Bernal urged residents at the rally to engage in a mailing campaign.

“You guys can stop it,” he told the crowd. “It deserves to be stopped. It needs to be stopped.”

The referendum’s verdict nears. The jury is those among the county’s more than 22,000 registered voters who participate Nov. 2 and during early voting.