

DINING WITH THE DEVIL?

Restaurant owner: 'Pittsylvania County is charging people just to survive'

By **ELIAS WEISS**

Star-Tribune News Editor

After a 5-2 vote on Tuesday, July 20, Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors raised the county's food and beverage tax rate from 4 percent to 6 percent. It didn't take long for one prominent Pittsylvania County restaurant owner to speak out in fierce opposition.

"This is not a luxury tax, this is a tax on everyday life," John Hoffman, owner of Mama Possum's Drive-In on Route 41 in Mt. Hermon, told the *Star-Tribune*. "To raise this tax on food by 50 percent is such an ugly, ugly way to do it."

Supervisor Vic Ingram (Tunstall) is one of two

supervisors, along with Ben Farmer (Callands-Gretna), who voted "no."

"I had no peace about voting for, in essence, a 50 percent increase in the meals tax," Ingram told the newspaper. "With the state of affairs as they are currently, I think people are paying enough in taxes."

For both Hoffman and Ingram, the question of increasing the food and beverage tax by half boiled down to the memories so many in Pittsylvania County share – growing up in a lower- or middle-class blue collar family, just struggling to get by.

"I remember when there was no sales tax of any kind," said Hoffman, who was born in 1953



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Mama Possum's employee Tiffany Dove prepares drinks at the Route 41 drive-in.

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and raised in Southern Virginia. "My first experience with taxation in Virginia was when sales tax first came into play in the early 1960s. I went into the grocery store with my mother and heard her complain that she had to pay tax to feed her children. For many decades, the food that mothers provided for their children was taxed. That was unconscionable to other states."

Ingram grew up with five brothers and sisters. In his family, eating out was a rare and special occasion.

"While we weren't poor, it was quite a struggle for my daddy to provide for us," he said. "I remember my mama cooking basic meals and then standing off to one side while making sure that we were all fed. She would often comment that she wasn't hungry. It was many years later that I came to understand that she gave up many meals just to make sure that her children didn't go hungry."

Today, however, both men agree eating out is no longer a privilege.

"Eating out is not a luxury anymore," Hoffman said. "Pittsylvania County is charging people just to survive."

Hoffman and Ingram mentioned working mothers and senior citizens, two dominant demographics in Pittsylvania County, as those disproportionately affected by the county's decision.

"It hurts me that there are people that can't enjoy a meal with their family, or a senior citizen may not be able to have breakfast and socialize with friends," Ingram said. "With them, much of what they enjoy is limited because they are a senior citizen. Many will go to a local restaurant and have coffee and breakfast with friends, and that's the only social involvement they have. I thought about them when I voted."

Hoffman, too, pointed to senior citizens a significant tranche of his clientele.

"Some senior citizens come in and eat all their meals here," Hoffman said. "They go to Reuben's for breakfast and have dinner with me. Maybe they are in a wheelchair or use a walker and it's too much to go to the store, buy groceries, go home and cook it just to sit there and eat it alone. It's cheaper to have a simple meal at a place like Reuben's or Villages or Mama Possum's, and those people are carrying the tax burden."

Pointing to the all-male board of supervisors, Hoffman said he took the most offense to what he perceived as the board's negligence to the needs of working mothers.

"A typical customer that comes through my Mt. Hermon business: a mom who may or may not have a husband, feeding two kids," he said. "She's getting food to take home because she worked all day. She doesn't have time to go home and fix meals and the kids are yelling for food."

According to Hoffman, the average tax per person under the new tax rate for a meal at his restaurant will be \$1.70 per person, up from \$1.13. Of that, 85 cents goes to Pittsylvania County.

"For the privilege of eating dinner, she's paying over \$5 to Virginia and the County of Pittsylvania. She's paying \$5 just to live," Hoffman said. "They might want to eat twice a day. That's \$10 every day that mom has to make, seven days a week, to give the great Commonwealth of Virginia and Pittsylvania County. This mom, she's just trying to feed herself and two kids, God forbid if she had a third one or a husband, and she's paying an extra \$3,500 a year."

Ingram said that, by raising the meals tax, Pittsylvania County is depriving its citizens of pleasure when it should be seeking ways to give its citizens pleasure.

"I thought the 4 percent meals tax was

reasonable. But to go up 50 percent, it's unconscionable," Ingram said. "There are some people that really struggle to take their family out for a meal. The owners themselves, they are struggling to keep their business afloat and to keep employees, so with that increased tax rate, I worry what it would do to local businesses, the workers and especially the waitresses if the tips will not be what they used to be because of that - I suspect so. In essence, we all suffer."

Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bob Warren, in his comments supporting the tax hike, mentioned that out-of-towners passing through Pittsylvania County would pay the tax if they stop and eat. That could alleviate some of the tax burden from county landowners, he said.

"Let's talk about taxing people that are 'passing through' our county as Mr. Warren stated," said Hoffman, who has a summer home and co-owns a business in Montana. "In Montana, talk about traveling through - we have one of the longest stretches of interstate in the world - I-90 and I-94. Without stopping, it takes 10 hours driving 80 miles per hour to get across Montana. A lot of people cross the state going to Seattle or the West Coast. You want to know how much Montana taxes the food people buy to feed their kids? It's zero."

Hoffman said that, after he started spending time in Montana, one of the hardest things to get used to was ordering a burger for \$9.99 and actually receiving a penny back.

"Mr. Warren implied that this was an opportunity to get more money out of people because so many people are passing through - people are passing through that don't come back," he said. "In Montana, they don't charge me more tax, like Mr. Warren said, as I'm 'passing through.' People come here to buy big-ticket things - recreational vehicles and \$500,000 motor homes, and that creates wealth in this state. You don't create wealth in the county by making it difficult to live there."

Ingram agreed that, by raising the meals tax, it is now harder to live in Pittsylvania County.

"When I was confronted with the vote of increasing the meals tax by 50 percent, I reflected back on growing up and how difficult it was at times to go out to eat," Ingram said. "I knew that by increasing the tax rate it would make it more difficult for many. If we don't have a tax base to cover operant expense, we [as government] have to cut back. We have to stop putting this burden on the citizens."

Hoffman adopts the position that, soon, people will flee Pittsylvania County for tax-free havens like Montana, Florida and Delaware.

"The idea to build up your economy by taking advantage of people is the wrong idea," he said. "I understand the Pittsylvania County government needs more money, but to gouge people who are eating by raising their tax 50 percent - I think these guys running government in Pittsylvania County think it is a luxury. It isn't a luxury anymore; it's what people do. There is no housewife cooking all day anymore, that is not how the world works. They are the ones making sure kids are fed and they are the ones getting stuck with the bill."

Ingram noted that, on November's ballot, Pittsylvania County residents will face yet another tax increase - the 1 percent school infrastructure tax. Ingram supports this tax, but said motives behind the two taxes could not be more incongruent.

"That's a good thing - a 1 percent tax that was authorized by the general assembly is something I support because that is

across-the-board. Everybody gets to pay that," Ingram said. "It's ripple effect when you punish people with taxes. They stop spending, so collectively that hurts everyone. I'm not a financial genius - I have to listen and rely on what the others say, but from my heart, it is simple: if the government doesn't have the money to buy something, then don't buy it and live within your means. Nobody likes to pay it, but reasonable people know taxes provide services. As supervisors, we are required to be empowered and to be mindful of how much money we take away from the citizens. I try to vote what's best for the people."

Hoffman, who has been in the Danville area since 1978, said he anticipates paying Pittsylvania County an additional \$25,000 per year based on his previous taxes.

"I think it's unconscionable that they can tax food like this," Hoffman said. "Mama Possum's restaurant last year paid about \$50,000 to the County of Pittsylvania from what we collected from our patrons. Overnight we now have to collect \$75,000 per year from our patrons to give to the Pittsylvania County people. That's on top of the other \$50,000 we already give to the state. We are just a mom and pop hot dog stand - we have 15 to 17 employees at a time. We employ local people and the profits... stay here in Pittsylvania County. That's over \$135,000 a year in tax for the State of Virginia and the County of Pittsylvania for the privilege of people eating lunch. It is really sad that they don't understand this."

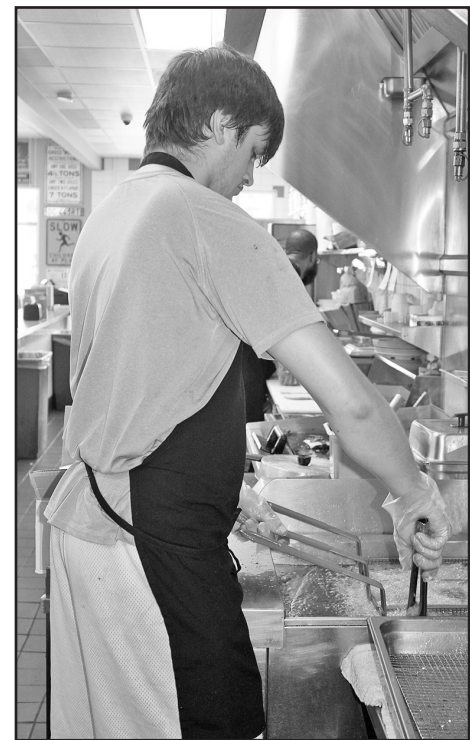
Hoffman wonders how he could be held responsible for such a significant portion of what the county last week said would bring in an additional \$400,000 total per annum.

"\$400,000? How is it that little? I'm paying one-sixteenth of the county's entire additional tax? Are you kidding me?" Hoffman asked. "When the government finds out it can tax something, they go for it. This government is a greedy beast that only feeds itself. Then the beast starves when everyone feeding it goes to Florida or Montana."

Warren argued that Pittsylvania County residents were at ease spending 6 percent on meals in other localities like Danville and Halifax County, but Hoffman had a rebuttal for that, as well.

"One of the most absurd things I heard stated at the meeting was that it would bring the tax to the same as Danville. Now, 100 percent of people can eat in Danville because it won't make any difference," he said. "A lot of people eat out twice a day. It's just how modern human life is, especially with seniors and on-the-go young families. They're being taxed because the fathers on that all-male board are not representing working moms. Now there's no reason not to go eat in Danville."

In Butte, Montana, where Hoffman co-owns a business, the town built a theme-park caliber waterpark for the city's children. For \$4, the children enjoy the park - and it was built with tax dollars, none



Elias Weiss/Star-Tribune

Mama Possum's employee Dawson Anderson fries onion rings at the Route 41 drive-in.

of which came from sales or meals taxes. Butte and Danville both have a population of around 40,000.

"What do we do in Mt. Hermon? They spend \$500,000 on a rental property to build a library," he said. "I never see any cars over there. If they want to tax people, give the people something that makes them happy. This is not how you make anyone want to live in a community."

Hoffman's cousin moved from New Jersey to Danville to flee abrasive taxes, and Hoffman says Virginia is slowly but surely becoming absorbed into the "big sponge of Northeastern taxation policies."

"It's driving people that produce income and that produce economic vitality out of those areas," he said. "The idea that Pittsylvania County has the power to tax, it gives them a lust to demand people turn over money simply because they want to eat."

Ingram has no plans to flee, and said he hopes he and his constituents can make do with the new tax.

"Digging under your car seat or checking your dryer for loose change or having to share a hot dog can produce fond memories, but I'd prefer that no one would ever have to struggle to enjoy a simple meal with their family," Ingram said. "It should be a happy time and a happy meal."

Hoffman said he's only staying in Mt. Hermon because of his hometown loyalty.

"By doing what they're doing, the Pittsylvania County government is driving people away," he concluded. "Apparently, the people that control Pittsylvania County don't have any kind of vision. You need a little vision to be successful in this life. These people just don't understand it."

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