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SNACK ON THAT

Burlington Feasting Upon Its Own Success

Not Enough Liquor Licenses To Go Around

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Burlington's red-hot restaurant market has driven up the cost of liquor licenses in the suburban town to prices nearing what operators charge for the sought-after licenses in Boston.

The likes of Del Frisco's steakhouse and other high-profile eateries are beating down the doors for a place to plant their flag in this town, located about 14 miles northwest of the state's capital.

Since 2010, five new sit-down restaurants have opened, and eight more are permitted, with another under review. Plus, eight fast food establishments, including a burger joint from celebrity chef Bobby Flay, have opened, with four more permitted and another under review. All told, the town will likely be home to 27 new eateries after the push began three years ago.

"There seems to be just an insatiable demand for restaurants here right now," said Mark Vaughan, an attorney with Riemer & Braunstein who specializes in hospitality work and has been instrumental in helping several restaurants locate in Burlington.

That restaurant demand is being driven by multiple development projects ongoing in the town of about 24,000 residents. Nordblom Co. is developing a massive mixed-use project called 3rd Ave, part of the company's Northwest Park, a 4.6-million-square-foot redevelopment that will have 200 residences and feature a Kings Bowl entertainment venue and anchored by a Wegmans supermarket.

Recently, National Development purchased a 1-million-square-foot office complex known as New England Executive Park on Mall Road between the Burlington Mall and Lahey Clinic. The town has approved an expansion there for up to 450,000 square feet of space that can include restaurants, office buildings and retail stores. The park already has a Tavern on the Square restaurant, and recently Tuscan

Kitchen, which has just one location in Salem, N.H., was approved to open a 9,000-square-foot restaurant right at the entrance to the park.

There's The Beef

Another smaller development is planned for the old Dodge dealership at 90 Middlesex Turnpike, where RC Trust wants to build 38,000 square feet of commercial space. A portion will likely be a mix of offices, retail and restaurant space, but Del Frisco's steakhouse wants to open a 352-seat, high-end restaurant in a 9,282-square-foot stand-alone restaurant on the site as well.

"Burlington has been a strong office market for a long time and we try to do everything we can to retain the companies we have now and attract new companies," said Kristin Kassner, Burlington's planning director. "We understand we need these amenities and retail and personal service uses to support the big fish that are here, so there have been zoning changes to diversify what were single-use office parks and ... continue the commercial market's success."

Despite the growing trend, the appetite for locating in a town with a burgeoning office and retail market comes with a big price tag. The town is allowed 25 full liquor licenses and five beer and wine licenses. All of those are taken. There is also special legislation that allows for an additional eight full licenses and two for just beer and wine at Nordblom's Northwest Park. Just three of those additional eight have been issued, and both beer and wine licenses are available.

However, the full licenses that have been transferred recently have cost a pretty penny. The Tuscan wanted a full liquor license, and convinced the Burlington Swim and Tennis Club to transfer its license. But it cost Tuscan's owners between \$200,000 and \$300,000, according to officials that asked for anonymity. No one from the Tuscan Kitchen or the



Rendering of the new KINGS bowling in the new 3rd Ave development in Burlington.

tennis club returned a reporter's calls. And when Del Frisco's finalizes its purchase of the full license from Burlington's Lemon Tree Thai restaurant, it could cost them up to \$300,000 as well, officials said.

"The greater Burlington area, including Woburn and five to 10 miles around, offers one of the most unique opportunities for restaurants, not only in our state but in much of the country," said Bob Luz, CEO of the Massachusetts Restaurant Association. "There is an incredible density of people there during the day. There are a lot of reasons restaurateurs want to be there. The Cheesecake Factory pulls patrons from southern New Hampshire, and Del Frisco's will pull from, well, everywhere."

The new eateries also contribute a significant boost to the town's coffers. From the local meals tax alone, Burlington receives close to \$1.5 million additional revenue, according to Riemer & Braunstein's Vaughan.

However, the town is having discussions to petition the state to increase the number of licenses available. Town leaders are concerned that they'll lose many of the small, independent businesses, like the Lemon Tree, that cannot compete with regional and national chains, Town Administrator John Petrin said.

"We're at the point where pretty much all the licenses are held by all chain restaurants," Petrin offered. ■

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