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Cumberland, region maintain hunger for restaurants

By **Roger DuPuis**, July 22, 2016 at 3:00 AM



(Photo / Thinkstock)

Americans love their restaurants, and residents of Central Pennsylvania are no exception.

Indeed, whenever a chain enters or leaves a market in the midstate, or a well-known local brand makes some significant move, it tends to make headlines — and generate web clicks, as news organizations see time and again.

Restaurants also are economic drivers.

Pennsylvania has more than 25,000 eating and drinking establishments employing 561,300 people — 10 percent of all employment in the state — in an industry that's on track to hit \$21 billion in sales across the commonwealth this year, according to the National Restaurant Association.

With all the options to choose from, could we be reaching saturation anytime soon?

Don't bet on it, economic leaders and **industry observers** say. Even when some chains seem to be pulling up stakes, the move may be more indicative of corporate health or changing tastes than the sector as a whole.

"Chain family restaurants and fast-food restaurants in particular often will try to place their brand in a **growing marketplace** often without regards to an over-stored or somewhat saturated market area," said Bob Gorland, vice president of Lower Paxton Township-based Matthew P. Casey and Associates Inc. He specializes in supermarket and retail feasibility studies.

"If they feel they can steal sales from competition to thrive or 'build a better mousetrap,' those chains will come, particularly if they can find a prime, high-traffic and high-visibility location," Gorland said.

“Often the strong existing restaurants with high loyalty factors, great food and service will continue to thrive, while the weak players may not survive over time,” he added.

Cumberland Area Economic Development Corp. CEO Jonathan Bowser noted how the Bob Evans chain recently closed restaurants in Hampden and Middlesex townships, only to have the locations repurposed for use by other operators — the owners of Worlmeysburg’s Duke’s Bar and Grille this spring began renovating the former Bob Evans on the Carlisle Pike to bring their recipes farther inland on the West Shore.

“Even though we continually see new restaurants announced in the capital region, especially along Route 22 and Union Deposit Road in Dauphin County and Carlisle Pike in Cumberland County, many will say that our current supply of corporate chain and locally owned restaurants do not meet the current and future demand,” Bowser said.

“Despite a slow-growing economy, restaurants on both shores are experiencing strong sales growth,” Bowser added, saying he has heard of weekend waiting times topping two hours at times.





“There is a lot of pent-up demand,” he said.

That demand finds outlet in many different formats.

Rebecca Yearick, downtown program services manager for the Cumberland County Housing and Redevelopment Authorities, said chain restaurants typically don’t seek out spaces in borough downtowns, but smaller **food-service establishments** do comprise a significant number of the new business development she sees in boroughs across the county.

“Food and drink remains the hottest ticket,” Yearick said.

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