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Rocky Springs to start \$1.9M expansion and renovation this month

TIM MEKEEL | Staff Writer Jan 10, 2017



Since buying the Rocky Springs Entertainment Center nearly eight years ago, Fred and Sherry O'Neill have learned a lot the hard way.

Initially, they were discovering the ins and outs of the bowling business, realizing it was far more complicated than they had imagined.

More recently, the O'Neills were educating themselves on the best ways to further modernize and diversify.

Now, the result of their informal but intense schooling is about to become visible — a \$1.9 million expansion and renovation that will boost the business significantly, they believe.

"We feel pretty strong about this project," said Sherry O'Neill.

"We're certainly going into this very knowledgeable and very confident that what we have created is going to be successful. It's what the area needs and what the area wants."

Construction at the 1495 Millport Road property is expected to begin later this month. Completion is set for August.

Rocky Springs will stay open for business the entire time.

Rocky Springs will add laser tag, expand its private-party room, replace its small bar with a new sizable bar and restaurant, add an arcade and add a redemption center (where customers exchange tickets they won at the arcade for prizes).

Other work will include replacing carpeting and seating, and remodeling bathrooms.

Scenic Ridge Construction is the project's general contractor.

All told, the West Lampeter Township project will add 6,300 square feet to the 31,600-square-foot facility, where bowling has been offered since 1954.

The improvements will lead to 12 to 15 new jobs at Rocky Springs, which now employs 25 on a 6.9-acre property.

Financing includes a \$910,000 loan from the U.S. Small Business Administration's 504 program plus a loan from Orrstown Bank.

The funding package was arranged by EDC Finance, a nonprofit that connects area businesses with state and federal loans and grants.

It's the second time that EDC Finance has aided the O'Neills, having arranged a \$183,000 SBA loan toward their April 2009 purchase of Rocky Springs from AMF for \$370,000.

"We feel that continued reinvestment in entertainment venues such as Rocky Springs is a key component to community and economic development in Lancaster County," said Lyle Hosler, the nonprofit's director of finance.

Township manager Dee Dee McGuire said she was "pleased" to see Rocky Springs growing, saying the township "does what it can" to help West Lampeter businesses succeed.

McGuire noted that she attended a private Christmas party at Rocky Springs last month. Rocky Springs provided "good food and good service."

"The group I was with really enjoyed themselves," said McGuire.

Roots in the 1800s

Rocky Springs, just southeast of Lancaster city, used to be part of an amusement park of the same name, with roots going back to at least the 1870s when it was a resort.

But the rides were shut down in 1967, briefly reopening in the late 1970s.

Part of the former amusement park was redeveloped in the early 1980s as River Bend Park condominiums, a name referencing a U-turn in the Conestoga River nearby.

The new project is not the first time the O'Neills have added features to Rocky Springs, besides updating equipment and improving lane conditions.

In 2009, soon after buying the business, they added the private-party room by walling off a group of six lanes.

In 2010, the O'Neills added a bar, taking advantage of Willow Valley Associates' successful campaign to persuade township voters to allow alcohol sales in the township.

This latest expansion and renovation project, however, is not what the O'Neills initially envisioned. In 2013, they got township approval for a project that would have added 18,000 square feet.

The O'Neills, though, had difficulty securing bank financing.

They attributed that to turnover in the lending staffs of local banks that were being acquired, plus the scarcity of comparable businesses that the O'Neills could cite as successful examples.

"(Lenders) have to understand our industry," said Sherry O'Neill. "A lot of (lenders) don't and it makes them nervous."

"With a big corporate bank, this project doesn't work," said Fred O'Neill. "We needed a bank that would look at the project, would look at us and would look at what we've done with the business."

Change in plans

But the O'Neills — who also own Barstools & Billiards, which sells barstools, pool tables, air hockey tables and foosball tables — turned the delay to their advantage.

They underwent what Fred O'Neill called the "painful but useful" process of revising their plan, guided by studying how other bowling centers around the country were diversifying.

Perhaps the most significant adjustment to the 2013 plan was their decision to remove six of the 39 bowling lanes, deciding that Rocky Springs could put that space to more productive use.

"I struggled with taking lanes out," said Sherry O'Neill. "But looking at the numbers, how much those lanes are used, it's easily done. ... We'll be fine."

The O'Neills will put a laser tag area where the six lanes are now. In the 2013 plan, the O'Neills were going to put laser tag in part of the newly constructed space.

A second major tweak to the 2013 plan was the decision to expand the private-party area. It will grow to eight lanes, by switching it to the opposite side of the building. It still will have a private bar and serving area.

The O'Neills said the expanded private-party area will meet demand from the corporate sector for larger accommodations.

The creation of a 90-seat restaurant and bar, with a full kitchen, was part of the 2013 plan.

In total, the changes are intended to give the public fresh reasons to go to Rocky Springs.

"We'll offer more things for families and young adults to make us a more inviting alternative for entertainment on a weekend," said Fred O'Neill.

While Rocky Springs adds more variety to its entertainment options, it will continue to emphasize bowling league play.

"We're not going away from our league bowlers. They'll still be a big part of our business," said Fred O'Neill.