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Fast-food franchise Checkers gets new life in Brevard

Feb. 27, 2013 11:45 AM, |

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FLORIDA TODAY



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Lisa Schultz is the operating partner. Checkers has reopened in several locations in Brevard, including this one on N. Wickham Road, just north of the Lake Washington Road intersection, in Melbourne. / TIM SHORTT/ FLORIDA TODAY

Checkers in Brevard County

- 4840 Babcock Road N.E. in Palm Bay;
- 520 N. Courtenay Parkway in Merritt Island;
- 2505 N. Wickham Road in Melbourne.

Checkers restaurant, the fast-food restaurant that mostly caters to drive-through customers, is making a solid comeback in Brevard County.

Three of four Checkers that had been closed in recent years have re-opened. And the new owners, Linda Schultz of Merritt Island, along with partner Alan Balen of Michigan, who took over a bankrupt franchisee's territory, plan up to eight stores in the county.

“From what I hear, a lot of customers missed the brand, missed the convenience and missed the food,” Schultz said.

Balen and Schultz played some market-research chess when deciding to re-open the Checkers restaurant brand in Brevard. The four stores closed in 2009 after the owner filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Balen and Schultz studied the Brevard demographics, analyzed traffic patterns and paid attention to what customers enjoyed about Checkers all along, fast and convenient service.

“I think you just have to stay with the (corporate) vision, quick service,” Schultz said.

The company reopened locations in Palm Bay, Merritt Island and Melbourne. A fourth location wasn't a desirable location and likely won't re-open.

There was one attempt to convert the former Checkers in Melbourne on Wickham Road into a drive-through Italian restaurant, but it wasn't successful. Owned then by Palm Bay restaurateur Nicholas Chios, he remodeled the building with the retro look of black and white tile to give the place a warm Mediterranean decor, complete with picnic tables and palm trees.

"We wanted something that was not like what was there before," Chios said. "And I did not want to be bothered by the previous company."

When Checkers re-acquired it, Balen and Schultz returned the property to its original look.

Checkers Drive-In Restaurants, Inc. started in 1986 in Mobile, Ala. It merged with Rally's Drive-In Restaurants Inc. in 1999. The combined company operates more than 800 restaurants in the United States.

Balen's Michigan group has 13 Checkers locations and has never had to close a restaurant.

Balen, a former Ohio State football player, owns the Michigan chain that now runs the Brevard operation. He hopes expansion will more than double the 30 employees in Brevard.

He offered praise to local and state officials for making it easy for his business to move to the area.

“Florida's been great to work with,” he said. “We really feel like they opened their arms to us.”

He also had good words about the local work force, adding that he believes the next five years in Brevard will be a good time economically.

“As we survey the (Brevard) markets, we thought they were good markets for Checkers,” he said. “I think it's on the uptick. “Even nationwide, we seem to be turning up.”

Even though the existing Checkers buildings were originally placed in prime locations, Balen and Schultz studied figures to confirm the desirability was there to re-open restaurants.

“We still ran the demographics on them,” Schultz said.

“We knew we could grow sales.”

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