

CHARLESTON REGIONAL BUSINESS JOURNAL

Franchise owner adds store, watching minimum wage debate

By Andy Owens

aowens@scbiznews.com

Published Dec. 10, 2013

The co-owner of a [Checkers](#) franchise headquartered in North Augusta said he and his father are keeping an eye on the debate over minimum wage laws as they [continue](#) to grow their franchise in the Charleston region.

Drew Pye started working at a Checkers when he was 15 years old, before his father bought into the franchise in 1998. Now that his family owns 11 restaurants, six of them in South Carolina — including one that just opened on Remount Road in North Charleston — he said that experience helps him connect with employees.

“The restaurant business is not an easy business. There’s a lot of hours you put in here. It’s easy to get insensitive if you’re not on the playing field with them,” Pye said. “I started there, and to this day, that’s how I operate. I get in here, and I work.”

“If we have a minimum wage increase it’s going to affect us, but I don’t think it’s going to be as bad as it’s made out to be.” The company first came into the Charleston market by taking over an existing Checkers in Summerville. The previous franchise owner left the store vacant at the high-traffic intersection of U.S. Highway 78 and North Main Street. Pye said his and his father’s experience in taking over that store quickly led to more expansion in the Lowcountry.

— Drew Pye, co-owner of a

Charleston-area Checkers franchise “Charleston has just been a really good market for us. When we opened up Summerville, it was one of the biggest, most hyped [openings](#). It was just a really strong turnout,” Pye said. “So the next step was take over the Dorchester Road store, and it had the same turnout.”

The third Charleston-area store for the Pye family is on Remount Road. The company is also looking at other sites in the Charleston area for future growth. He said the region could hold six to eight stores.

Each Checkers employs 25 to 30 employees for a small location and 50 to 60 employees for a high-volume store. He said each location has five to seven managers and two or three full-time crew leaders.

Pye said he and his father are paying attention to the national debate over raising the minimum wage to more than \$7.25 an hour. Some workers have protested in front of food and retail establishments, asking for as much as \$15 an hour. He said anyone in the restaurant industry who employs minimum-wage workers is watching, but he said there’s not a large concern yet.

“Something like that would double what we’re paying employees for the same job,” Pye said. “If we have a minimum wage increase it’s going to affect us, but I don’t think it’s going to be as bad as it’s made out to be.”

Pye said that aligning with a franchise like Checkers helped the company weather the economic downturn because the brand was established with a supportive CEO, and the company could [buy](#) in quantity to leverage better prices — something a smaller operation couldn't do. He said the average sale at Checkers is \$6.50.

“It's positioned well. In 2010, everybody was jumping ship in the restaurant business. They were jumping ship because they couldn't make it,” he said, mentioning the advantage of being with a franchise. “You've got a brand that people know. You've got a brand that people trust. Checkers was something that's always been there.”

Reach Andy Owens at 843-849-3142.