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Checkers opens, looks for more Buffalo-area sites



Checkers has opened a restaurant in Cheektowaga.



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[Checkers](#) famed “Big Buford” burger, chili dogs and “Angry Buffalo” wings have arrived in Cheektowaga.

The drive-in restaurant has opened a franchised location at 2563 Union Road, with the outlet being run by former West Seneca residents [Bill Nowak](#) and his sister, [Gail Gentry](#). True, [Delaware North](#) Cos. has had a Checkers outlet in the Buffalo Niagara International Airport for the past few years and there are a pair of nearby Checkers along New York State Thruway outlets in Pembroke and Corfu, but this marks the first local free-standing restaurant for the chain in the area.

For Nowak and his sister, both of whom are relocating back to the area, running a Checkers is a dream come true.

“If we didn’t do this, we’d both be looking back later in our lives and wondering if a great opportunity passed us by,” Nowak said.

And, the brother-and-sister tandem aren’t stopping with their just-opened Cheektowaga restaurant. Nowak said he hopes to develop four more during the next five years.

Checkers arrival comes at a time when the Buffalo Niagara region is seeing several major food chains that in past years bypassed the area have changed their thinking and entered the marketplace. The list includes

Popeye's and Sonic, which is scouting sites for its first store. Popeye's opened last year on Elmwood Avenue and is a second location in the works for Niagara Falls. More are planned.

"Personally, I view Western New York as a great area of opportunity," said [Jennifer Durham](#), Checkers vice president of franchise development. "Buffalo has all the right ingredients to be a wonderful market for us. I think we've just scratched the surface of what we can do there."

While there are several Checkers in the New York City metropolitan market, the Cheektowaga site is the chain's first street-side location in the Upstate region. Buffalo was selected because of the market's recent resurgence and the franchise-strength of Nowak and Gentry. Gentry worked for 18 years with other Checkers outlets in southern states. The pair decided to return to Buffalo to be closer to their elderly parents, who, ironically moved into a senior living complex not far from the Union Road site.

Originally, another franchisee had the rights to the Buffalo and Erie County market while Nowak and Gentry had the rights for Niagara County and Rochester. The other franchisee had a change of heart and sold those development rights to Gentry and Nowak.

"All of sudden, things took a complete 180 for us," Nowak said. "A lot of things that needed to happen just fell into place at the right time."

The deal is Nowak's first foray into the restaurant world. He spent the past three-plus decades in the corporate and IT world. Gentry has a deep resume of working with franchised restaurants including Taco Bells and Checkers.

"Gail has the ability to take a restaurant that's in last place and get it to first place," Nowak said of his sister.

Gentry will focus on running the restaurant internally while Nowak's responsibilities rest more with construction, land acquisition and financing.

With 800 restaurants nationwide, Checkers and its corporate sibling, Rally's, are known for its burgers, fries and hot dogs. One of Checkers calling cards is that the restaurant focuses more on a 1950s-style drive-thru motif, with only limited indoor seating. The Cheektowaga site, part of Checkers new prototype, can seat approximately 25 people. The restaurant employs 60 people, most of which are part timers.

So how will the drive-in concept work during Buffalo's winters?

Just fine, Nowak said.

Nowak talked with a Checkers franchisee in Chicago, and, ironically the franchisee was originally from Lackawanna. He was told business was great all year.

"People are used to their environment," Nowak said. "People in Buffalo don't shut down and stop going to restaurants just because it's cold or snowy."

Durham agrees.

"Our volumes are just as strong in the Northeast and as they are in the Southwest," she said. "Checkers is about the food, the site and the characteristics."

Checkers is open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 a.m.