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December 14, 2012

Section: Local News

### **Checkers returns to Sebring location after 17-year hiatus**

By SAMANTHA GHOLAR

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SEBRING -- "I think this is going to be our crown jewel," said Russell Harms, owner/operator of the newest fast food restaurant in town.

Harms is referring to the new Checkers location that opened its doors Thursday morning in Sebring 17 years after the first Checkers -- which was in the same spot on U.S. 27 across from the Southgate Plaza-- closed up and moved away.

"I started trying to locate a spot for this Checkers in Sebring about two years ago. It took a year to find the perfect location and we closed the deal with the bank last December," Harms said.

Construction began on the restaurant in early fall when Harms purchased and re-located a closed Checkers. The former building was dug up and transported from Crystal River to Sebring on a flat-bed truck, a unique sight to the few who got a chance to see it rolling down U.S. 27.

"They're modular," said Harms. "You just break the foundation, dig them up. The wings detach and then you just set it down in the new location."

A little more than \$100,000 was spent to refurbish the closed building to get it into tip-top shape for the Sebring location. Even with the purchase, overhaul and refurbishing of the closed Checkers, Harms saved approximately \$200,000 and employed dozens of local workers during the overhaul process.

The 20-year franchise veteran knows the importance of the new location and has worked hard to provide a quality experience at his establishment like he does at his others.

"Sebring is our fifth store. We own the one in Avon Park and the one up in Haines City. We also own two other locations -- one in Brooksville and one in Inverness up in Hernando County. We've got some good stores, but this I feel like is going to be our best," Harms said.

Harms feels the need for the Sebring location will be the driving force on the store's success. After many years without a Checkers restaurant, Harms is happy to bring back the quality food and service that the area needs.

"The first question I've been asked by people when they find out I'm the owner is 'What happened to the old one?'" Harms said.

Harms isn't fully sure why the last Checkers restaurant was closed and left Sebring. The owner has actively been seeking information and documents regarding the last location, but has yet to get a clear answer.

As for his store, Harms is nervous and excited at the same time about getting the doors open.

"This is my first ground up opening and it's been fun. This is the first store that I've had that's brand new, the others I just took over. You never know what is going to happen when pull that curtain back, but ... we're all ready," Harms said.

The Checkers location will employ 35 local workers. The store's general manager is a former Avon Park Checkers worker who has been promoted to his new position.

"It's (hiring) been fantastic. I have to give a big shout out to Heartland Workforce particularly Colleen (Dukes). She tracked me down when she found out about us opening and provided space for interviews and everything. I've never had an easier hiring process in all my years," said Harms.

Harms is thrilled to be a part of the Sebring community and passionate about providing a quality experience to each of the customers that visit his store.

"We aren't re-inventing the wheel here. We are just going to continue to do what Checkers does and that is provide great food and a great value. This is quality food that everyone is enthusiastic about and familiar with. It feels great to employ 35 people here and we are adding something that has been gone since 1995. This will be great for the community," Harms said. The Sebring Checkers will be open daily from 10 a.m. until 2 a.m.