

# County's first Checkers fast food drive-thru to open this week

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(Photo: Gillis Benedict/Livingston Daily)  
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A few finishing touches are left before Livingston County's first Checkers fast food restaurant and drive-thru opens this week.

Freeland-based franchisees Alan and Tracy Balen decided Hartland Township would be an ideal location for their next restaurant. They own 20 Checkers and Rally's locations.

The restaurant will feature a drive-thru and indoor seating for about 40 diners about 1/4 mile east of U.S. 23 at 10440 M-59/Highland Road.

It is attached to an existing BP gas station in a 1,871-square-foot former Taco Bell that relocated about three years ago.

Alan Balen said he expects to open for customers either Thursday or Friday.

The Balens originally planned to call it Rally's. Checkers and Rally's merged in 1999 and have the same menu. He later found out locations in what the company considers the Detroit region, including Livingston County, are branded as Checkers.

"Some people have the perception they are different," Balen said. "It's the same great burgers. ...They both have the Big Buford burger, which is our most popular sandwich."

He said the seasoned, batter-dipped French fries set Checkers and Rally's apart from other fast food establishments.

Balen said he decided to invest about \$500,000 to convert the site into a Checkers for several reasons.

"The traffic is good here and it works well being connected to the (BP gas station) convenience store with our own building on the side. That's been a model that has worked well," he said. "It's a growth area, and obviously that breeds more businesses in the area."



Checkers restaurant franchisee Alan Balen works inside the soon-to-open Hartland business Monday, Oct. 29, 2018 as final touches are put in place. (Photo: Gillis Benedict/Livingston Daily)

While his does, many Checkers and Rally's locations do not feature dining rooms. But offering indoor dining is a business model that has been working for them.

"This will be our fourth store with a dining room, and we've had really good success with that, because as a travel stop, people like to sit down for 10 minutes instead of eating in the car," Balen said.

The soon-to-open Checkers is looking to hire about 20 more part-time and full-time staff, starting at \$10 per hour.

"We're about half-staffed right now and will bring in staff from other locations, just to open," Balen said. "We're looking for cashiers and food prep staff."

The Balens opened their first Rally's in Bay City in 1991. They now own 11 Rally's in Michigan and nine Checkers in Michigan and Florida. They own four Qdoba Mexican fast-causal restaurants in Montana. They also recently signed a franchise agreement for three future Jersey Mike's Subs locations, including one on Owen Road near U.S. 23 in Fenton set to open in February.

Cheryl Herrst, a manager at the attached BP gas station, expects the new Checkers to boost business.

"It makes us more of a one-stop shop, where you can stop and get your gas and snacks for the road and then a meal at Checker's," said Herrst, 53. "Hopefully it will bring more people in here. ... The Taco Bell has been vacant and a lot of people have been asking us what's going in there, and when I told them, a lot of people got excited, especially because of their fries."

Stephanie Gooding, a 33-year-old Flint resident shopping at the BP gas station Monday, avoids fast food when she can.

"But we like their seasoned fries," Gooding said. "We will probably eat here at some point. There's a Rally's in Fenton and I like that one."