

Burger joint sees expansion opportunities around Columbus

By [Dan Eaton](#) – Staff reporter, Columbus Business First

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Drive-thru is driving sales.

As Covid-19 pandemic restrictions limit and maybe even discourage dine-in business for food providers, drive-thru operators are finding themselves well positioned.

“We’re pandemic proof,” Robert Bhagwandat, director of franchise development for Checkers & Rally’s Restaurants Inc. “We’re ahead of the game and everyone is trying to catch up.”

The Tampa-based fast food operator will open its 15th Central Ohio unit in the coming weeks at 3850 S. Hamilton Road in Groveport. It aims to add at least one new local site a year moving into the future.

The 900 Rally’s and Checkers units (same menus, different names depending on the market) are drive-thru only and have been thriving during the pandemic. The company opened a Dayton location over the summer that had a record opening for the business.

“We’re doing a lot better than we first expected,” Bhagwandat said. “We’re obviously well set-up to operate with these regulations. From the business side we’ve been able to capitalize on that.”

Akron-based Swensons Drive-In’s also is adding local units, and said it saw a similar trend of customers flocking to its business in part because the [car-hop style delivery](#) already was familiar. Del Taco cited surging sales as a reason for its new [Central Ohio expansion](#), while even Dublin-based Wendy’s Co. posted its [best third quarter same-restaurant sales](#) in 15 years.

Ohio is the third-largest state for Rally’s/Checkers with 72 locations and it’s by far the largest under the Rally’s brand. Florida and Georgia both have more restaurants. Both are under the Checkers name.

Operations Director Carlos Del Pozo said the Groveport site was appealing because there is a lot of growth in that area. A new housing development is under construction across the street. Chipotle just opened. A Starbucks is coming soon.

Altoona, Pennsylvania-based Sheetz is [exploring a site](#) in the area as well.

Del Pozo said Rally’s also is benefiting from its value proposition, offering customers satisfying food for a good price. In addition to its Big Buford burgers and signature fries its new Mother Cruncher chicken sandwich has been a hit, helping add to those sales.

“You get your money’s worth,” he said.

Central Ohio is a company-owned market for Rally's, but Bhagwandat said it would be willing to sell the units to a qualified operator, though the bar would be high since it's a good market for the company.