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Coastal businesses hit by Ian reopen inland; Capital Grille; and 'burdensome' Party City



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Today: Updates on Sanibel, Fort Myers Beach, Pine Island, Bonita Springs, Bell Tower, Edison Mall, Gulf Coast Town Center, Del Prado Mall and Waterside Shops including Capital Grille and businesses battered by Hurricane Ian finding new

homes farther from the Gulf of Mexico while others are gone for good.

Reader David Quinlan checked in with me:

"Phil, any news to report about the planned opening of The Capital Grille at Bell Tower? Just curious."

More: Is Indiana emerging as more desirable than Southwest Florida? A new study says it's so

And: New businesses, housing, developments keep coming to SWFL's hot Coconut Point corridor

Plus: SW Florida's South Seas sailing to September open; and where is Bed Bath & Beyond closing?

In the Know: Your Mercato 'reboot' suggestions; and plans for yet another new SWFL resort

Dear Curious Dave, Thank you for the question. The \$8.5 million investment project to replace Mimi's Cafe remains in the permitting process, with Lee County officials standing by on some questions about the 10,000-square footer that's projected to seat more than 300.

At whatever point construction might begin at Daniels Parkway and Tamiami Trail in Fort Myers, it's taken typically about eight months to build, based on the history of the chain, which has averaged a new location a year since 2017 for a total of 62, according to its Orlando-based operator, Darden Restaurants.

While not mentioned in its most recent earnings transcripts, its annual review calls for two or three national additions in 2023 to go along with its only other current Southwest Florida berth in the Naples Mercato at Vanderbilt Beach Road and Tamiami. If you go, make sure you didn't lose too much on Sunday's Super Bowl bet and check your credit limit. The average 2022 check per person, not including tip, is \$93, with booze accounting for about a third of it, the report shows.

Darden spokeswoman Carly Maddock would only confirm Friday that permitting is continuing while Bell Tower Shops reps said they had no additional information, but that they did have updates on a surge of other enterprises coming their way.

Finding higher ground away from the beach sand after Hurricane Ian

La Ola Surfside Restaurant, a longtime mainstay of devastated Times Square on Fort Myers Beach, is the latest merchant of several moving away from the shoreline or expanding to Bell Tower and other higher ground venues.

Owner Tom Houghton signed a seven-year lease this past week for 4,136 square feet with 1,843 square feet of outdoor space in the Fort Myers mall, where he's adding a small stage and dance floor.

More: New federal lawsuit questions dealings tied to Fort Myers Beach Margaritaville profits

Launching in late March or early April, Houghton said this allows his team to get to work while bringing "a taste of the beach inland" with live music in the afternoons and evenings.

"It's going to be the same as here on the Beach in the same respects that we're going to do breakfast, lunch and dinner. Same menu. Same great entertainers. A lot of the same great staff," Houghton said. "Hurricane Ian destroyed our beautiful location in Times Square."

Houghton, who came up with a food truck on the island after Ian's Sept. 28 hammering and is in the process of constructing a bar there out of shipping containers, hopes to eventually rebuild a full-service restaurant in the future. With a contingent of seven musicians, he had 21 employees when the storm struck.

More: What thousands of you told me about FMB Margaritaville expansion; and new housing rules

“Opening a second location in Fort Myers was a direct result of the storm,” Houghton said. “Bell Tower will provide a safer home base while the island gets rebuilt, and we await a hopeful future location back on the beach.”

Colliers Senior Vice President Dannielle Robinson, who manages Bell Tower leasing, said she has added several coastal companies wanting to reopen their operations.

“We’ve seen a lot of businesses from Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel that are now looking for space inland following the devastation of Hurricane Ian,” Robinson said. “Many of these businesses have been on the islands for years and are now considering a new location to stay in business.”

What coastal businesses have new locations after Hurricane Ian?

The new Bell Tower additions include: Synergy Sportswear, Bubbly Latitude, Adventures in Paradise, Macintosh Books and Paper, Butterfly Beach, Sanibel Candle Company and Congress Jewelers, which has been on Sanibel for more than four decades.

While Congress plans to rebuild on the island, its operators wanted to get back up and running as soon as possible, and that wasn't going to happen in the short-term.

"The damage we experienced from Hurricane Ian made rebuilding our store in the same Periwinkle Place location far too challenging at that time," said Scot Congress, president of the shop, who remains an island resident. "Although our building was destroyed, our spirit was not."

More: Which 8 coastal businesses pounded by Hurricane Ian are opening in Bell Tower? What we know

Bell Tower's draw also has included Sanibel city government, which has conducted meetings at the Crowne Plaza there after Ian.

Another arrival anticipated by the Bell Tower is the Sola Salon Studios beauty chain, which already has four other Southwest Florida locations.

For Bell Tower this all helps make up for at least one recently departed: mixed media artist and fashion designer Yvonne Krystman's Art4Wear, which moved to Coconut Point mall on Tamiami Trail, south of Williams Road in Estero.

More: In the Know: Mid-year 2022 finds 6 luxury projects (and much more) coming together in SWFL

What are owners of devastated Beach, Pine Island, Naples stores saying?

Other centers and spots are also receiving new tenants who had been pounded by Ian.

Among them:

■ The Naples Design District's Republic of Decor, which suffered severe flood damage, now has a setup up the road a bit at the Waterside Shops at Pine Ridge Road and Tamiami Trail through at least March.

“The past few months have been challenging,” said owner David Fruscione, who has pledged to donate 10% of sales to the Collier Community Foundation’s Collier Comes Together Hurricane Fund. “We are so honored to be able to operate alongside such distinguished brands.”

■ Matlacha's Hooked Island Grill began operating this past week from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. in the former Famous Dave's Bar-B-Que of the Gulf Coast Town Center at Alico Road and I-75. Not that co-owner Erik Lebsack has given up on the island, but that's more than a year away.

“We are going to get back there. It’s just going to take a while,” Lebsack told my food-writing colleague, Robyn George. “We had just re-landscaped the parking lot, brought new equipment in, everything. We were crazy busy all summer, and we

wanted to get ready for season. We had just finished everything and four days later, it was gone.”

More: Margaritaville builders buy land of oldest FMB hotel; deals in Times Square, Bonita Beach

■ They didn't go as far, but a pair of restaurants got off the beach sand and onto the bay. The previously adjacent Fresh Catch Bistro and Junkanoo, 3040 Estero Blvd., Fort Myers Beach took over the Bayfront Bistro site, with the latter debuting Wednesday on the first floor as Junkanoo Below Deck. Behind the Publix on Estero Boulevard, Fresh Catch plans to occupy the upstairs there at Snook Bight Marina as soon as late this week.

"There are too many obstacles to be able to rebuild," according to a statement by the pair of eateries owned by Franco Russo. "This island has been our home for 30-plus years, and we (didn't) want this devastating hurricane to be the reason we have to move our operations off the island." He told our food writer that many of the employees worked at the original locations: "I wanted to get back open for the staff, for the customers as soon as I could."

More: 'Wiped off the face of the earth,' Fort Myers Beach businesses start over post-Ian

Bavarian bus line connected to major Fla. metros sets up at Edison Mall

Another type of traffic is coming to a local mall.

After using a Cracker Barrel or two, among other loading zones, Germany-based FlixBus set up the Edison Mall at Colonial Boulevard and Tamiami as its Lee County base on Thursday.

The intercity bus service connects the area to Florida metros as far as Tallahassee and Gainesville and places in-between such as Orlando, Tampa Bay and Sarasota

plus South Florida.

A check this past week for a one-way ticket Thursday from the mall to Fort Lauderdale International Airport rang up to \$23.98 including tax, a 50-pound suitcase and a 25-pound carry-on. If you wanted to choose a seat and have no one next to you to avoid a Karen or a know-it-all Elon, the total reached \$36.96.

FlixBus began using the McDonald's at 8875 Davis Blvd. as a Naples base in January.

“Edison Mall is excited to offer the Fort Myers community this innovative way of travel with FlixBus,” said Brad Lunn, the mall's general manager. “In addition to offering our guests a premiere shopping and dining destination, we can now offer them travel as well.”

More: In the Know: The losses of Edison Mall including 1965 original. Remember Maas Brothers?

Party City: 'Unnecessary and burdensome' in Cape Coral

Cape Coral's "unnecessary and burdensome" Party City was among the company's first targeted closings this year as it declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy, according to public records.

While the firm didn't release what retailers among its more than 800 were being shuttered, a check of federal paperwork by In the Know found the Del Prado Mall near T.J. Maxx between Hancock Bridge and Veterans parkways was among 28 national slots where the organization was no longer interested in operating and activity was ceasing.

It's the only one to do that in Florida, and the group says the measure is to help manage about \$1.5 billion in debt, and not part of going out of business across the country, according to documents.

While not specifically addressing the closures, Party City Holdco Inc. CEO Brad Weston issued a statement.

More: As indoor pickleball expands in Florida, who are world's big names investing in the sport?

"In the face of pandemic headwinds, a global supply chain crisis and other macroeconomic challenges that have faced our industry, we have made significant strides in PCHI's ongoing transformation — establishing a solid foundation for long-term growth and continued success as the market leader in the celebrations space," Weston said. "We are as committed as ever to inspiring joy by making it easy for our customers to create unforgettable memories."

Unless you live in Cape Coral, of course.

The closest for those residents is at Page Field Commons, 5025 S. Cleveland Ave., Fort Myers. The others in Southwest Florida: Park Shore Plaza, 4377 Tamiami Trail N., Naples, and Coconut Point.

The brand, which specializes in supplies, decorations and costumes, has had a rough ride in recent years including permanently locking the entrance at more than 45 venues in 2019 due to the global helium shortage, and for some reason was part of a largely aimless Saturday Night Live skit just over a week ago featuring actor Pedro Pascal.

More: With LeBron, Brady in on pickleball, group seeks to rule Florida's indoor courts. What we know

Liquidation of Old Time Pottery in Bonita Springs

This comes as Old Time Pottery works on chaining the doors of its underperforming store at the Center of Bonita Springs that sits at Bonita Beach Road and Tamiami. But first, it has SB360 Capital Partners guiding its liquidation. Old Time touted prices of up to 75% off, but a lot of what we saw last weekend was in the 15% range.

The home décor enterprise emerged out of bankruptcy in 2020, but outlets have continued coming and going.

"Although our Bonita Springs store is closing, you can still shop at our Fort Myers store," the establishment said in a statement. "We appreciate all of our loyal customers."

It has no others in the region besides its presence at Fowler Street and Colonial Boulevard, with a total of 14 in Florida.

More: In the Know: Collier firms moving headquarters to Lee County, closer to where employees live

These are part of a little bit of a trend with a few chains.

For example, struggling home goods merchandiser Bed Bath & Beyond announced at the end of January it was slated to close 87 sites, but Southwest Florida was not part of it. That came after it had already said earlier that month it was ridding itself of 62 others.

And as part of its staggered closings over a three-year-period through the end of 2023 of 350 locales to create "a smaller and healthier fleet," Gap Inc. dropped its Banana Republic fronts in Coconut Point and Waterside Shops.

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