

Chesterfield Observer

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Gathering Steam

Plans for a new brewery tap a growing market in county

By Rich Griset

CONTRIBUTING WRITER



It was a bad day at work last summer that drove Brad Cooper to beer.

“I was commiserating with a co-worker, and he looked at me and said, ‘Well, I guess we only have another 40 years of this,’” recalls Cooper, who previously worked in the mining industry in quality control.

That night, Cooper resolved to start Steam Bell Beer Works, a craft brewery he hopes

to open in **Midlothian** either late this summer or in early fall.

“It’s always been a dream of mine since I brewed my first batch of homebrewed beer,” says the lifelong **Chesterfield** resident. “I really caught the bug when Hardywood opened up.”

The craft beer craze is continuing to spread its tentacles throughout Central **Virginia**. Since the General Assembly changed its rules regarding breweries in 2012 – allowing breweries to sell beer without operating a restaurant – the state has experienced a beer explosion, and now it’s coming to the county.

When Hardywood Park Craft Brewery was just starting out in **Richmond**, Cooper was one of the business’ early volunteers, eventually becoming a part-time assistant brewer there. Cooper had to give up working at Hardywood when his other job picked up, but beer was always on his mind.

After that bad day at work, Cooper started making serious plans and purchased a seven-barrel brewing system in **Boston**. He recently filed a letter of intent to lease space at an industrial building at **1713 Oak Lake Blvd.**, just off **Genito Road** near **Powwhite Parkway** and state **Route 288**.

“I just really noticed that there’s a lot of people in the **Chesterfield** area who really love that brewery experience but are tired of having to go across the river and pay tolls and find parking,” he says. “Within a

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5-mile radius there's over 100,000 people, so there's definitely room to grow.”

Cooper credits Ben Humphrey, a project manager with the county's economic development department, for helping turn his dream into reality.

“He's pushed really hard over the past years to get those zoning regulations opened up in [Chesterfield](#),” Cooper says. “Previously in the county, if you wanted to open a brewery it could only be industrial zoning, like where DuPont is” located off of [U.S. Route 1](#).

Humphrey says the economic development and planning departments have been working to interpret existing ordinances for new breweries, and that [Chesterfield](#) is trying to entice both large and small breweries to the county.

“[Chesterfield](#) sees craft breweries as a great local attraction, as well as a ‘quality of life’ asset to residents of the county – especially the young professional workforce,” Humphrey says via email. “We want to assist breweries not only to locate in Chesterfield, but also to help them grow and create more employment opportunities for Chesterfield.”

Currently, the only other brewery in [Chesterfield](#) is Extra Billy's BBQ, which has been brewing beer at its restaurant off Midlothian Turnpike since 2000, predating the [Virginia](#) craft beer explosion. Extra Billy's does most of its sales in-house, but also distributes to local bars through Brown Distributing.

Dylan Brooks, brewer at Extra Billy's, is looking forward to Steam Bell opening.

“That will be great,” says Brooks, who typically brews American-style beers and [India](#) pale ales. “It will draw more people to this side of town, and for the people already over here, it will raise awareness.”

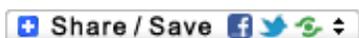
Cooper plans to start with kegs and will bottle some specialty beers. He's also talking to Old Dominion Mobile Canning, which visits different breweries in the area and cans beer onsite. As for the types of beer he'll brew, Cooper already has some ideas.

“As a homebrewer I was focused on a lot of saisons and sour beers, fermented beers,” he says. “I'm really looking at doing a farmhouse ale style, which is going back to old farmhouse breweries in [Belgium](#). Farms brewed with wheat – they brewed with rye, fruits and vegetables that were available.”

As for the future of breweries in [Chesterfield](#), Cooper says there's room for competition. In fact, at a recent craft brewers conference in [Portland, Oregon](#), Cooper met a man who wants to open a brewery near Chesterfield Towne Center.

“It's a huge, untapped market on this side of the river,” Cooper says. “There's definitely a lot of room for growth, a lot of room for expansion.”

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