

Can businesses band together to brand 'The Edge' of Williamsburg?

Businesses along Rt 143 that runs through York County, James City County and Williamsburg called Merrimac Trail and Second Street are considering branding the area. The name being tossed around is "The Edge District".



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Businesses on the edge of Williamsburg and York and James City counties are talking about how to brand the area.

They hope to better promote the Merrimac Trail and Second Street corridor to both locals and tourists.

York economic development director Jim Noel, who lives nearby, pitched the idea of branding and marketing the area as “the Edge District” or something similar to promote restaurants like Second Street, Cochon on 2nd, Casa Pearl, Emily’s Donuts and Cafe and Shoofly Dairy Bar, along with unique businesses like The Virginia Beer Co. and 8 Shires Coloniale Distillery.

The businesses promote each other through word of mouth, but the roads are confusing to outsiders and a name would simplify where to find them, Noel said.

Noel started by convening food and beverage-related establishments at The Virginia Beer Co. on Wednesday. Based on feedback, he’ll cast a wider net to involve more businesses in the area and is seeking their input.

The initial concept is to pool resources to market the district’s businesses on a website and other marketing materials but the informal group of businesses could tackle other challenges, he said. The brand name is yet to be determined, although Second Street restaurant co-owner Mickey Chohany advocated for “The Edge,” dropping the district.

Any true effort would have to be a business-led endeavor, not government-led, although there could be some type of EDA seed money support if approved, Noel said.

A successful branding could attract attention to fill vacant spaces, like the former Tequila Rose restaurant property, Noel said. The Column 15 coffee roastery and cafe slated for James-York Plaza would fit right in, he said.

Virginia Beer Co. co-founder Robby Willey, who also serves on the Williamsburg Economic Development Authority, said connectivity through signage or some visual cue is important. It helps people to feel more comfortable spending time in or walking in an area, he said.

“I just think the power of place is so important,” Willey, 36, said.

“It’s got to be more than street names.”

Rick Overy, vice chairman of the Williamsburg EDA, said he'd rather be in the middle of something than on the edge of anything, but said he was glad to see multiple localities working together and that there's a lot of enthusiasm to see the overall area succeed.

Shoofly ice cream and dessert shop co-owner David Hertzler said the marketing may be able to pull folks from across town.

Emily’s Donuts co-owner Emily McCarthy agreed, adding busy small business owners may not spend as much time on marketing as they should and sharing the load could be helpful, particularly if they can learn from each other’s expertise.

“I think if you’re trying to grow this side of town and keep it fruitful, you’ve got to do something,” McCarthy said.

8 Shires distillery manager Tara Tyler said a branded area would make it easier to cross-promote, particularly to travelers staying at hotels who want to stay close and don't necessarily want to go to Colonial Williamsburg or the touristy areas.

The Second Street-Merrimac Trail side of town has been service-oriented where people come to shop, eat, get their nails done or get their cars serviced, Chohany said. He’d like to hear what neighborhood residents think of “The Edge” brand because he wants something identifiable but not detractive.

For more information or to give feedback on developing such a marketing effort or district, email Jim Noel at jnoel@yorkcounty.gov.

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