

Local officials hope new branding campaign will give east Williamsburg-area businesses an edge

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Virginia Beer Co. is one of about a dozen food and beverage businesses expected to be part of The Edge, a proposed food-and-beverage district that James City County, York County and Williamsburg have allocated funds to establish. (/ Virginia Gazette)

When they look down Merrimac Trail on Williamsburg's east side, economic development officials envision a food-and-beverage destination. That vision is clearer now that Williamsburg, James City County and York County have agreed to allocate money to help get the idea off the ground.

The Edge, a new branding venture borne of a joint partnership between Historic Triangle localities and area business owners, intends to marshal Merrimac Trail food and beverage establishments under one marketing banner. In doing so, the idea is to promote and support area businesses as well as create a recreational space for locals with a defined sense of place.

Consociate Media, a local marketing firm, has a plan to make that happen for \$7,500. The company would create a logo, a website and set up social media platforms that will promote and brand the district, according to a project proposal. The area will be called the Edge because the businesses involved are located in all three Historic Triangle localities where their boundaries meet around Merrimac Trail.

On Tuesday, the James City County Economic Development Authority voted to allocate \$2,000 toward the project. With the county's allocation, the project has its local government funding lined up. The Williamsburg EDA and the York County EDA have likewise agreed to put up \$2,000 each for the project. The plan is for the remainder of the funds to be covered by area businesses that want to participate.

"What we have here is a very unique geographic area, where three localities come together at a point," said Robin Bledsoe, James City County EDA chairwoman said. "I think the marketing campaign could be really unique."

The York County EDA developed the concept to create an identity for the Merrimac Trail corridor and establish an amenity to market the area to residents, particularly as a means to attract young people to the region. A working group of government officials and business owners have met several times to discuss the proposal as the project has progressed. Virginia Beer Co. and ShooFly Dairy Bar are among the businesses involved in the project.

For Robby Willey, Virginia Beer Co. co-founder and Williamsburg EDA member, the project brings him back to the days when he and his business partner were looking for locations for their brewery.

As William and Mary alumni, they were focused on downtown Williamsburg and Richmond Road. When they discovered what would become the brewery's Second Street location, it opened their eyes to a new world of experiences and opportunities. With the Edge up and running, more people can be exposed to what the eastern side of town has to offer.

“The idea of proactively marketing all of the food and beverage businesses in this area now seems like the perfect way to highlight that there is much to do and enjoy in this neck of the woods,” Willey said in an email.

The Merrimac Trail corridor is an up-and-coming area, featuring a variety of places to grab a bite to eat or something to drink. The branding concept hopefully will give the area a sense of community and help boost the businesses already there. Ten to 15 businesses are expected to participate in the district initially, York County economic development director Jim Noel said.

Noel hopes there will be a cascading effect as time goes on. As the district increases its profile, more of the area's existing businesses will join and new businesses will be attracted to the area because of the branding. The Edge takes inspiration from Scott's Addition in Richmond and the Neon District in Norfolk, Noel said.

Noel plans to have a kick-off celebration, featuring food and drink from Edge businesses, to dedicate the Edge in spring 2020.

Some aspects of the proposal still need to come together.

The project has yet to collect the money needed to pay Consociate from businesses. Consociate's proposal also suggests some additional paid add-on services that could be taken advantage of to expand the scope of the branding effort.

It's unclear at this stage how the project will be judged a success. Noel suggested revenue tracking, admission to ticketed events held at the Edge and web traffic could be used as indicators of the branding's effectiveness. He said there was value in quantifying metrics, and that would have to be figured out in the future. Ultimately, though localities will put up most of the initial funds to get the ball rolling, the Edge will thrive or wilt based on the buy-in and efforts of area businesses.

"It's going to have to be led by the businesses," Noel said. "They have to shape it and own it."

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