

# Mebane City Beat: A Social District boost

BY KELLY HUNTER

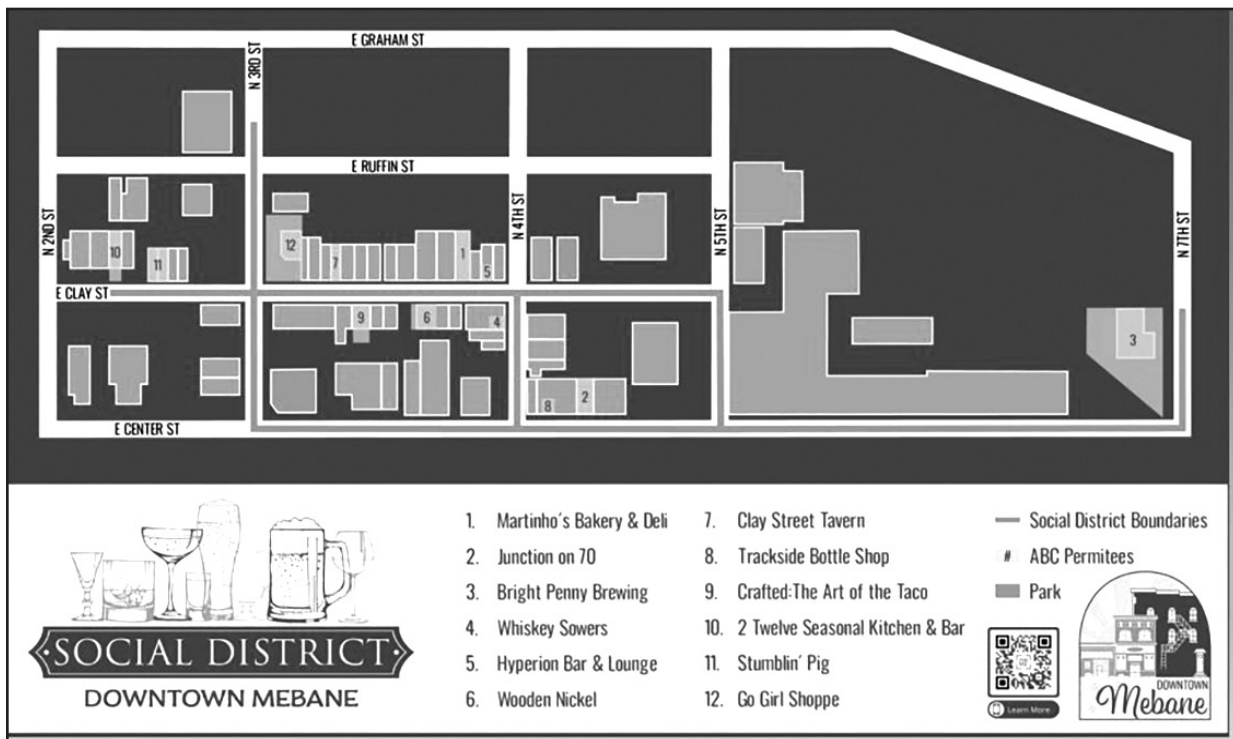
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS OF ORANGE

Before the pandemic, the prospect of enjoying a beverage openly and out in public was a foreign concept. Individuals who wanted to drink on the go could not do so without breaking the law. Fast forward a few years to March 2024, and there are currently 55 registered social districts across North Carolina alone. A social district, or designated area(s) where people can consume alcoholic beverages purchased from ABC permittees inside a defined public area boundary, took off three years ago when the General Assembly passed a law allowing city and county governments to create social districts in September 2021. The General Assembly passed this law in an effort for social districts to be considered tools for aiding small businesses with economic recovery during the pandemic.

Since the inception of social districts, communities have seen increased activity in their downtowns, adding vibrancy and vitality. Being able to take your beverage of choice on the go has encouraged people to eat, drink, shop, and explore downtown while also luring new businesses and restaurants to open up shop. The Downtown Mebane Development Corporation (DMDC) serves as a nonprofit, independent entity working to facilitate the revitalization and preservation of historic Downtown Mebane through a strong partnership with the City of Mebane. The DMDC, which manages the Mebane Main Street program, began studying social districts in other downtowns across the state, and their research concluded that social districts proved to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on downtowns. Members of the DMDC spoke exclusively with downtown business/retail/restaurant/bar owners, who all expressed an interest in bringing a social district to positively charming Mebane. Thus, the DMDC began doing its research on the subject.

Months were spent collecting feedback from other cities with active social districts, including visiting established districts and setting up one-on-one meetings with Mebane City Council members to discuss the idea. Two information sessions were held with Burlington's Downtown Director, Erin Nettles, to inquire about Burlington's process and experience with its newly launched social district. Afterward, the DMDC determined the goals they were trying to achieve with a social district, the areas or boundaries they would like to include, and the ideal social district hours and days of operation. The DMDC then visited with ABC permittees and businesses to ensure their understanding of a social district and that they can opt in or opt out when it comes to allowing alcoholic beverages in their business. After determining those key factors, the DMDC met with city management and the Mebane Police Department to discuss the concept and review any possible challenges or obstacles. With the support of all key stakeholders, the DMDC then presented the proposal for a social district to the Mebane City Council at the April 2024 regular meeting.

The proposal for a social district in downtown Mebane was presented to the city council members at the April 8 meeting. Executive Director Barbara Hollerand spoke on be-



COURTESY OF CITY OF MEBANE

half of the DMDC and gave a presentation recommending the social district be in operation Thursday to Sunday from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. The district boundaries would encompass sections of Center Street, Clay Street, and Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh Streets downtown. (Please reference the map)

The district's perimeter would be marked with signage, including a map of the district and rules for participating. There would also be a website individuals can reference that includes a map of the social district perimeter, a list of all participating businesses, and a clear set of rules. The proposed social district rules were presented as follows: Only beverages sold by ABC permittees for onsite consumption in the district can be consumed in the social district. Beverages purchased within the social district must be consumed inside district boundaries and within the district hours of operation. Individuals must use specially branded 16-ounce or smaller cups with the social district logo and purchase location.

A public hearing was held at the next council meeting on May 6, and that night, the proposal for a Social District Ordinance in downtown Mebane was approved in a 4-1 vote by the Mebane City Council on a 12-month trial basis. According to the Alcoholic Beverage Commission, all municipalities interested in creating social districts must register the district with the Commission. Registering the district involves sharing the map, rules, and maintenance plan with them and making them aware of any changes that may occur to the social district. Municipalities must also create social districts according to the social district laws defined in NC House Bills 890 and 211. Therefore, to get signage posted and cups ordered in compliance with the social district rules, a launch date of Friday, June 28, 2024, was established.

The DMDC Board and most downtown businesses believe this is a positive step toward furthering economic development in downtown Mebane. Participating ABC permittee businesses for the social district include 2 Twelve Seasonal Kitchen and Bar, Bright Penny Brewing, Clay Street Tavern, Crafted: The Art of the Taco, Go Girl Shop, Hyperion Bar and Lounge, Junction on 70, Martinho's Bakery and Deli, Stumblin' Pig, Trackside Bottle Shop, Whiskey Sowers, and Wooden Nickel Pub.

Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and social districts encourage support of local restaurants, shops, and bars. With the approval of a social district, individuals 21 and up can now be put on a waiting list for dinner and enjoy a cocktail, beer, or glass of wine while shopping at downtown establishments until their table is ready. The belief is that money spent in locally owned establishments stays local. Small businesses tend to hire locally, boost the local economy, and create economic resilience and future growth. Statistics show that a resilient downtown establishes a sense of community pride and support. For those worried about an increase in crime or how the social district will be monitored, Chief McKinney from the Mebane Police Department stated, "The impact on MPD will be evaluated once the district is operational. Initial extra duty assignments will be funded through our budget for the first 60-90 days, with additional patrols potentially subsidized by merchants during peak hours. We plan to use foot and bike patrols to monitor the district."

The City of Mebane is delighted to join the other 50-plus municipalities with a social district. Supporting small businesses, building community, and creating a more vibrant downtown will only enhance the foundation that Mebane is a great place to live, work, and play.

## FIRE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

when crews arrived and assessed the fire, it was determined the best way to proceed was not to drench the roof with water to put out the flames that were just underneath. Much of the burning was happening at a higher elevation of the structure, and doing less damage to the contents in the lower areas inside the building.

"We basically had to use some tactics to tame the fire, but yet let it burn above the metal deck (of the roof)," said Chief Cabe. "If we did what fire departments typically do, which is put water on the roof until there's no more fire, we would collapse the roof and destroy everything under it."

Bootstrap Brands, which produces and sells Happy Wax melts and other products, occupies much of the area affected by the fire and is temporarily closed. Balanced Bookkeeping of N.C., which has offices in the building, took on extensive damage. The physical office is closed, but the company was able to work remotely.

"It's a total loss," said Shelley Cole, owner of Balanced Bookkeeping of N.C., which moved from Mebane to the Hillsborough site late last year. "There are a lot of computers, a lot of desks, a lot of printers, and we had conference rooms and training rooms and big screens in those rooms. And personal effects of different staff members, things

like that. But the good is that in the time we're living in, most everything is on the cloud. We are lucky in that we have not, so far, found any loss of client data."

Carolina Closets Plus leases a large section of the site that is set away from where much of the fire burned. That business was virtually unaffected and is able to continue operation.

Emails sent to officials with Bootstrap Brands went unreturned. The company moved into 1515 Coleman Loop Road in 2020, moving from Durham. Happy Wax operates under Bootstrap Brands and manufactures scented wax melts in the shape of small teddy bears — similar to Gummy Bears candy. The company also sells a variety of warmers.

Chief Cabe said the fire, which involved eight units and Mutual Aid from nine different stations, burned layers of roofing materials between the metal roof decking of the building and the top layer of the roof. The location of the hottest and most-burned areas led fire officials, including the Orange County Fire Marshal, to believe the fire was not an accident.

"Usually, if you have an accidental fire, it points to something like electricity, a stove, a microwave or a break room area," he said. "We typically don't see them happen in settings that this one was. There's no high-power load in a building when there's no one working. We can tell where fires start because it burns longer where it starts than it does anywhere else in the building. There's a lot more damage where the fire starts, and where this

fire started doesn't make sense. There's no logical, reasonable expectation that you could have a fire in this location."

Orange County Fire Marshal Elizabeth Farnan, said evidence collected from the fire indicated it likely was not from an accidental cause.

"We did reach out to the State Bureau of Investigation and to the Office of the State Fire Marshal, who came Monday and assisted with the investigation," Farnan said. "There was no appearance that this was normal fire currents."

She said that once there's evidence of a possible crime, law enforcement steps in to investigate.

"We (Orange County Fire Marshal, SBI and Office of the State Fire Marshal) collect evidence that helps us to know the origin of the fire, the area of the fire. There were apparent indications that the building had been broken into, so then it's also a crime scene, and the Orange County Sheriff's Office came in to investigate," Farnan said.

On-Demand Rides | Meals | Groceries | Home Services

With **GoGo**, you have a say:  
Live and age **your way**.

**GoGo**  
Get help with rides, groceries, meals, and more!  
Memberships starting as low as **\$1 per day**.

Available 24/7 Nationwide:  
**1-877-600-4367**

**LeafFilter**  
GUTTER PROTECTION

CALL TODAY FOR A **FREE INSPECTION!**  
**1-877-649-1190**

**20% OFF** + **10% OFF**  
Your Entire Purchase\* Seniors + Military

++ We offer financing that fits your budget!

\* See Representative for full warranty details. \*One coupon per household. No obligation estimate valid for 1 year. †Subject to credit approval. Call for details. AR #0366920922, CA #1035795, CT #HC.0649905, FL #CBC056678, IA #C127230, ID #RC-51604, LA #559544, MA #176447, MD #NHC148329, MI # 2102212986, #262000022, #262000403, #2106212946, MN #R731804, MT #2619192, ND 47304, NY #2014522, WI #13010953900, NM #R08093, NV #R69700, NY #R-19114, HI-52220, OR #218294, PA #R406383, RI #CC-41354, TN #7056, UT #10783658-5501, VA #2705169445, WA #LEAFNNW822JZ, WI #WV056912

**BACKUP POWER. PEACE OF MIND.**

**POWERPROTECT**  
Standby Generators

**BRIGGS&STRATTON**  
ENERGY SOLUTIONS

Get a Standard Warranty of **7 YEARS** \$849 Value

**Call 1-866-515-0541**

**When outdoors, your impact should be smaller than this ad.**

**OUTDOORNC.COM**  
#MAKE IT YOUR NATURE

**LEAVE NO TRACE**

**I BUY HOUSES AND MOBILE HOMES WITH LAND**

Any condition • Anywhere  
**(704) 285-0452**

**Jaeuzzi** | BATH REMODEL

YOUR BATHROOM. YOUR WAY. IN AS LITTLE AS

**ONE DAY**

**SPECIAL OFFER**  
**Waiving All Installation Costs**

CALL NOW  
**877.556.0251**

Add'l terms apply. Offer subject to change and vary by dealer. Expires 8/25/2024.