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Keeping the hunt alive

Pheasants Forever banquet in Chaska

BY ALEX CHHITH
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Hunting for Glenn McPadden is more than just a hobby.

It's a passion and a way to protect the environment.

"There's a lot of thought involved," McPadden said, noting it takes some waiting. "Just seeing animals that you're not going to shoot. All the wildlife you see in that (deer) stand and listening to the sounds of nature — it's something you can't reproduce any other way."

McPadden, of Camden Township, has been hunting since he was 8 years old and has been a member of the Carver County Pheasants Forever Chapter for 33 years, only taking a brief break after his son took his own life.

"Me and my son went to a meeting one night. We were big hunters and thought we'd give back a little bit and get involved," the 70-year-old said of when he first joined the organization.

Hunting still reminds him of his son. "It's something we did all together, all his life," he said.

When McPadden was asked to join the group the second time around, he didn't hesitate.

"I come from a family of hunters," he said. "I've lived in the country all my life it's been my passion."

McPadden, who now serves as the organization's treasurer, is gearing up for the Carver County Pheasants Forever Chapter's 33rd Annual Banquet 5-6:30 p.m. Thursday, March 21 at the Chaska Event Center. Proceeds support local pheasant populations

Pheasants to 10 >

Help wanted

Restaurants seek workers in tight market

BY LARA BOCKENSTEDT
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Assistant Manager Gerald Trott can whip together a pizza at Domino's Pizza in Chaska in half a minute. To someone who hasn't worked in the back of a kitchen, it may seem like an extraordinarily short time for meal prep.

The business has open positions, though, and when dinner rush arrives, Trott has to conjure the resources to make some 200 pizzas.

"That's where the struggle is," he said. "We've hit a wall. There's no backup. There's no extra help, and we have a world of consumers and nobody wants to come make the food."

They are six people down, he said, meaning he has to work some 55 hours a week.

"I don't want to be working that many hours," he said. "But if I don't work that many hours, we can't stay open."

According to the 2017 State of the Restaurant Industry Report, the number of jobs at eating and drinking places has gone up 43 percent through the last 17 years. The overall percent growth in U.S. employment in that same period of time was 12 percent.

Restaurants and food service businesses across Hennepin and Carver County are being slammed with the constraints of a labor shortage. They are experiencing higher demand, while seeing job openings balloon and a shrinking pool of skilled candidates.

It has caused some employers to address solutions to a living wage by turning to transportation and increased pay. For others, changing their atmosphere to attract a dwindling crowd of working high school students has helped.

President Jeff Filipek of the SouthWest Metro Chamber of Commerce said work culture, pay and skills are issues area food service businesses are confronting.

Restaurants to 9 >

Accommodation and food service businesses

Hennepin County

2006: 2,503 businesses and 61,253 employees

2016: 2,929 businesses and 75,097 employees

Carver County

2006: 137 businesses and 2,266 employees

2016: 165 businesses and 3,371 employees

Source: U.S. Census data

Dunn Brothers Coffee Manager Amy Van Eps said the downtown Chaska business has created an environment that's attractive to high school students, which has made all the difference in recruiting new employees.

PHOTO BY LARA BOCKENSTEDT

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RESTAURANTS

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“The mantra I’m hearing over and over again from the restaurant service industry in general,” he said, “is we can’t find and retain quality employees.”

As far as affordable housing and a living wage are concerned, he said transportation has been a solution for the time being. Companies including Metro Transit and SouthWest Transit have been making it possible to meet the hospitality industry’s odd hours.

“I think, honestly, it’s going to get a little worse before it gets better,” Filipek said.

The 2017 State of the Restaurant Industry Report said employers are finding that the crowd of candidates to fill positions is “evaporating.” Three in 10 restaurant operators said their current job openings were difficult to fill, especially in kitchen work.

WAYZATA

Anyone who has walked downtown Wayzata over the years would notice the difference in the breadth of restaurants. Every now and then, a new restaurant opens and, with it, more competition in recruiting skilled workers.

Owner Terri Huml of Gianni’s Steakhouse in downtown said each new restaurant is “like a shiny penny.” A fair amount of her staff work two restaurant service jobs in Wayzata.

She’s had a wealth of loyalty in positions such as chefs and dishwashers, she said, with workers who have been with the restaurant since it opened in 1996. Other positions, such as waiters and hosts, have been harder to fill. The positions are more traditionally filled with high schools students.

“When you come in to these wealthier parts around the lake,” she said, “these kids don’t need to work, and I’ve got four positions open right now I can’t fill.

Huml has reached out to friends, schools and teachers to see if other students can work part-time or, if they can work a day or two.

Sharing staff among restaurants in the city can feel like you’re splitting resources among a small community, she said.

“I’m only open for dinner, and so we have to make the sun shine between 5 and 8 for three hours,” she said. “It does make it tough as there’s only so much you can pay a dishwasher. The wage disparity has been a huge thing.”

Rideshare options, such as Uber and Lyft, have been instrumental to getting employees out to their jobs around the lake. Whether it’s the odd hours when public transportation isn’t an option, or poor weather, more than one restaurant owner has used the service as a way to get employees to their stations and safely home.

GETTING TO WORK

Becky Pierson, president of the Greater Wayzata Area



Sous Chef Samuel Garcia prepares a miso glaze and seared sea bass in the kitchen at 6Smith in Wayzata. The restaurant has implemented several adaptations to meet the challenges of a labor shortage.

PHOTOS BY LARA BOCKENSTEDT

Job openings

In December 2018, there were more than 7.3 million job openings across the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Over the course of one year, from December 2017 to December 2018, the number of job openings in accommodation and food service went from 812,000 to 1,012,000 — a jump of 200,000.

In June 2018, Minnesota’s unemployment rate was 2.8 percent, according to the Twin Cities Quarterly Economic and Business Conditions Report. The U.S. unemployment rate was 4 percent in January of this year.

Chamber of Commerce, has mediated needs between restaurant owners and Metro Transit. Most of the hospitality industry workers are coming in from Minneapolis and northern suburbs.

“We’ve got good routes here during the work day,” she said, “but oftentimes the need for restaurants is a late night kind of thing, and it’s harder to maintain routes a little outside the routes that are right in that core city area.”

Senior Transit Planner Steve Mahowald said after working with Wayzata in 2017, changes were made so a later trip on bus route 645 leaving around midnight on weekdays. The goal was to have a minimum of 12 riders going on the route, which runs from between Minneapolis and Wayzata and stops at the Louisiana Avenue Transit Center and Ridgedale.

“Unfortunately, it’s been hanging around four riders,” he said. “We came back to them (Wayzata) a couple months ago and said, ‘Folks, we’re gonna have to cut the trip.’ And what we’ve agreed to do is keep it in place until August to see if we can get ridership up.”

A specialist in Metro Transit’s Commuter Service Department is contacting em-

Using Metro Transit

A Metro Transit spokesperson said those who are interested in taking the 645 route running from Wayzata to Minneapolis can plan their trips by calling 612-373-3333, and speaking with a representative.

ployers all along the 645 route to see if there are any workers who could make use of a potential midnight trip on weekdays. Overall ridership in the West End area has increased a third since late 2016.

“What we’re trying to do in particular is get folks in the core of Minneapolis that are looking for employment at Ridgedale and West End and connecting them with these positions that are looking to be filled,” he said. “We’re hoping we can keep this trip in place because we know it provides a valuable service.”

The fight for a living wage has eked change in staff across the metro. The State of the Restaurant Industry Report stated it’s churning a quicker turnaround in employees.

“The ‘quit rate’ has risen in recent years,” it said, “indicating that employees are increasingly confident in the labor market and willing to move to another job.”

At 6Smith in Wayzata, Owner Randy Stanley said the restaurant is approaching double what it used to pay four years ago in every job. He remembers the wage then

being \$14.50 in his kitchen. It’s now risen to about \$22. With every pay increase, there comes a rough patch in raising the cost of menu items, which is a challenge for owners to orchestrate.

Stanley said restaurant owners have agreed not to poach one another’s workers for the same shift.

“So if you’re working lunches at Cov, I won’t hire you for lunches at 6Smith, I’ll only hire you for dinner,” he said. “The same employees are working at a number of local restaurants. But we don’t fight each other for employment. It’s a kind of respect.”

SKILLED WORKERS

There have been other tactics Stanley has installed over the last four years, he said. Back then, he might have had 18 cooks to get through winter. Now, he has about 32. The restaurant is more preemptive in its hiring by recruiting all the time, and by hiring candidates, even if the restaurant doesn’t need them.

“We try to attract like-minded people who aren’t just looking for a job,” he said. “They’re looking for an aspirational company they can grow with, who believes in them.”

The State of the Restaurant Industry Report said one in five restaurant job openings were filled in 2016 by people promoted from other jobs within the same restaurant business.

Training goes a long way to retain staff, Stanley said. Staff education is a tactic being used at Mystic Lake, where the executive chef concocted a culinary apprentice program



Garcia is a sous chef at 6Smith in Wayzata. He is one of many area employees who commute to work.

with a two-year track open to chefs of all skill levels.

The labor shortage breeds other problems as well.

At Domino’s in Chaska, Trott said the shortage has had an impact on customer service. Trott knows of several area businesses that haven’t been able to open their doors some days because they didn’t have the staff.

He has worked at a handful of local businesses. Five years ago, he started to notice a difference in filling job openings.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS?

“The younger generation, the school-aged kids, are not all that interested in working,” Trott said. “Honestly, it used to be that that was a good 40 percent of our staff, and currently, I have one minor that works here.”

Teens once clamored to be in the workforce: 58 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds were in it in the late 1970s, the 2017 State of the Restaurant Industry Report said. However, by the 2010s, only 16 percent of restaurant employees were teens. The percentage has increased slightly since 2010, but only just so.

Emily Mattran works in the college and career resource center at Chanhassen High School. She keeps a board in her office thumb-tacked with job opportunities. Among them are jobs at Panera Bread, Culver’s Restaurant, the city of Victoria, marketing, tutoring and retail work.

“What I would say is that a lot of the students in our school districts, if they’re working, they have plenty of choice,” she said.

She said over the years the quantity of school activities students are involved in hasn’t

changed as much as the weight of commitment required by the activities. Along the same lines, the U.S. Department of Labor published a blog post in March 2017 that said the drop of teens in the labor force could be attributed to more time-consuming coursework and summer classes.

At Dunn Brothers Coffee in downtown Chaska, Manager Amy Van Eps said it’s harder to fill morning and afternoon shifts, as high school students have to be in school. The coffee shop hasn’t run into much trouble in filling open positions.

“I think a lot of people seek us out as they’re currently customers of ours, and they see what kind of atmosphere we have and think it would be a fun place to work,” she said. “In my time here, I’ve never had to post anything or do anything to get employees. We’ve just been able to find them because they sought us out.”

High school students want to work at places that match their identity and values, she said.

MORE TO COME

The stress of a marriage between a labor shortage and the restaurant industry is that the number of job openings in restaurants isn’t expected to taper off soon.

The National Restaurant Association said it expects 1.6 million job positions to be added between 2017 and 2027. Minnesota was projected to see an 8.8 percent increase in that time.

“This is happening all over the country,” said Huml, at Gianni’s. “It’s something we’re seeing everywhere. It’s tough to know what the right thing to do is.”



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