

## For Norfolk businesses, the MEAC is a slam dunk

### NORFOLK

At D'Egg Diner on East Main Street on Saturday, most of the booths were filled for lunch. Patrons wearing blue, gold and maroon shirts were sprinkled across the restaurant.

It was the final day of the weeklong Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference basketball tournaments, and business was hopping.

The advantage of a tournament coming through town is that customers come in waves and not all at once, like when a concert ends, said Leah Thiessen, a server at D'Egg.

"It's the first big event coming out of winter, so it's good for us," she said. "It's been steady all day."

The restaurant added staff to the schedule to deal with the influx.

The MEAC is on year two of a three-year contract to play in Norfolk. The tournament also has been played in Richmond, Winston-Salem, N.C., and Raleigh.

Downtown restaurant owners couldn't have asked for better weather. With the high near 70 and a cloudless sky, attendees walked around to see the sights before the championship games.

Brenda Mickles Foote, a Hampton University alumna, came to the tournament last year, and brought her husband, Henry, Thursday.

"I love coming back here to see how downtown has grown," she said in front of a Waterside restaurant.

Still, questions about attendance linger.

Last year, paid attendance was 7,105 for the men's championship game at the 9,140-seat Scope, but games in the earlier rounds had lower numbers.

"When Norfolk State's playing, the crowds are big. And when they're not playing, they're the same as last year," said John Rahmstine, an official with the city of Norfolk.

Norfolk State lost to North Carolina Central on Friday night.

This year's attendance numbers have not been released by the MEAC.

Like restaurants in the area, hotels have seen an increase in guests as the week goes on. Even as teams are knocked out and go home, more fans come to cheer on those in the championship games.

"We've seen a lot of walk-ins, and there has been significant pickup the closer we got to the weekend," said Teri Felton, assistant front office manager at the Waterside Marriott.

Those last-minute travelers ultimately mean more customers at downtown eateries.

Back at D'Egg, manager Frank Farsi cashed out a seemingly endless line of guests.

"It's been much better for us this year. These people have been great," he said.

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