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D'Egg Diner set to reopen after renovations following 2015 explosion

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Virginian-Pilot file photo
D_Egg Diner facade



Virginian-Pilot file photo
Ben Stone, right, Rudy Johnson, center, and Pete Davis work at D'Egg Diner in downtown Norfolk in July 2004.



Virginian-Pilot file photo

The winner of the best meatloaf in 2009 was D'Egg in Norfolk. The meatloaf was a special menu item and was only available on Wednesdays as long as supplies lasted.

A 2015 explosion seriously hurt the bottom line at D'Egg Diner in downtown Norfolk, but after months of business hardships, things are looking up. The popular eatery, located at 204 E. Main St., plans to reopen at 7 a.m. Wednesday.

On the morning of April 17, 2015, a contractor working to access a sewer line on the northeast side of the city-owned building struck an electrical line, The Virginian-Pilot reported in 2016. A six-month investigation found that the contractor's mistake caused a series of events that ultimately resulted in electrical arcing, a flash fire and the explosion, which occurred just before 8 p.m.

“I’ve been in the restaurant business most of my life, and this has just been crazy hard,” D'Egg owner Phil Decker said. Explosion damage cut off the main passageway through the building, and “that knocked about 20 percent of our business off. Then we didn’t have any parking, then they put up scaffolding. It was just one thing after another.”

Although the explosion injured no one, the blast collapsed interior walls and cracked and shifted an exterior wall of the the building, which opened in 1931, according to a city webpage. The explosion forced D'Egg to shut down for two weeks. It reopened with a limited schedule.

Decker said he’s spent more than \$300,000 on renovations, about \$160,000 more than he anticipated. The higher cost is because repair work downtown has proceeded intermittently, necessitating multiple visits from electricians, wall finishers and painters. The downtown D'Egg closed Oct. 24 for a renovation that was supposed to last 70 days. That turned into 100 days.

“We went a month over because of the facade work on the Arcade,” Decker said. On top of that, five days before closing, Decker injured himself. He had major neck surgery about three weeks ago and has been wearing a neck collar.

Decker said Norfolk officials have been helpful and empathetic. After the explosion, Decker said he received about 40 calls, including City Hall officials and a fire department captain. He also expressed amazement that no one was injured. The night before the explosion, the building hosted a wedding party, and another function was scheduled for the night after.

Although seating capacity is reduced and customers will have to use an entrance surrounded by scaffolding for the time being, “we’re still going to be pretty busy because of our location and being next to The Main,” which will have an exit that connects to the Arcade “about 10 feet from our back door. ... We were extremely fortunate being between two convention centers,” in The Main, a Hilton-branded hotel and conference center slated to open April 1, and the Norfolk Waterside Marriott.

Asked why he decided to keep his business downtown, Decker said he’s optimistic about Norfolk’s future and D’Egg’s place in the community.

“When we came on Main Street in 2003, one, there were no breakfast restaurants at all downtown, and we were really the only people down here on this end. There wasn’t much going on.

“We knew what was coming down the pike. We knew the (new) hotel was coming. ... We had a great relationship with the Marriott. That was really our lifeline for many years. And the Marriott was still there. And my family’s law firm is directly across the street. So basically every day I see my mom, my brothers. It was a good situation. We’ve got Waterside opening, we’ve got The Main opening and all this stuff is happening simultaneously. This is a boom time for the city, and we’re right in the middle of it.”

D’Egg also has a second restaurant at 1170 Lexan Ave., off Hampton Boulevard in Norfolk’s Larchmont neighborhood. Between the two locations, Decker employed about 45 people; 25 of them worked downtown.

In an effort to keep everyone employed, employees at the D'Egg West location who used to get four or five work shifts a week were reduced to two days a week, "which is tough on everybody. Now, thank God, they're all going to get to come back to work, and hopefully we'll hire some new people," Decker said.

Reflecting on the ordeal, Decker said, "I'm so fortunate that it's over – or at least there's a light at the end of the tunnel." As a result of the explosion, "costs for repairs and clean-up for which the city was responsible were valued at \$800,300; most of that has been reimbursed from the city's insurance," Lori Crouch, a Norfolk city spokeswoman, said in an email.