



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

Could Babcock be a date night destination?

By PATRICIA BORNS News-Press

A new restaurant is rising in what might seem the middle of nowhere on State Road 31 in southern Charlotte County.

Table and Tap - the name was chosen in a contest of Kitson and Partners employees - aims to open in time for Valentine's Day at Syd Kitson's Babcock Ranch, with local sourcing right down to the chef.

Out of 30-plus applications from around the state received by the Kitson team, "We've narrowed it to two," Babcock President Rick Severance said last week. "And we're not going to tell you who they are."

Both the candidates have local experience, so the ultimate pick will be plugged in to Southwest Florida's provender; a key ingredient in the restaurant's farm-to-table plan.

Severance in a past life worked on Seaside and other resort-style communities in northwest Florida, creating a well-heeled clientele for that region's crabbers, oystermen and small organic farmers. Now he's tapped Matt Seiler, most recently of Marco Island's Marriott, as Babcock's food and beverage director, to do the same here.

From its outdoor beer garden to a menu showcasing butchered meats, Table and Tap seems well-aimed at the Midwest diners the development team hopes will visit and,

especially, settle at Babcock.

Set beside the lake in the town's central square, the restaurant might remind diners of a rambling Mackinac Island summer house, with 56 seats under air and 30 outdoors within listening distance of a band shell.

"We want it to be like hanging out in your family room," said Severance, waving a hand at the sand where Adirondack chairs and hammocks will dot the lawn, along with outdoor chess, checkers and Jenga games for the kids.

Seiler is curating 12 to 14 local beers from breweries such as Fort Myers Brewing Company as well as breweries from Bradenton and Tampa. And for the menu: "We have an opportunity to use Circle C Farm, which does great work with meats," he said, referring to the Felda-Bonita Springs provider of grass-fed, free-range, GMO-free protein.

"You'll be able to get a nice-sized sirloin strip or airline chicken breast, or meet up with friends for share bowls for two to four people. And if you just want a great burger, you can have that, too."

Seiler is also in talks with Oakes Farms, a big source of produce in Collier County, and Lee County hydroponic grower Buckingham Farms.

"The real excitement is what the chef can do putting their own fingerprints on what's being sourced any given day," he said. That could include watermelon or honey from Babcock's own leased farmland, and herbs from a community garden grown by residents.

Circle C co-owner/ farmer Nicole Kozak, who also supplies Executive Chef Rob DeFrancesco at another Kitson community, Talis Park, said she's excited about Babcock.

"It's an opportunity to control everything and design it with all the sustainability features we have in Southwest Florida," Kozak said.

The farmer, who's also a Realtor, thinks Table and Tap will draw patrons from Interstate 75 as nonresidents discover Babcock as a destination.

"Like River Ranch outside Orlando. The Kitson idea reminds me of that," she said.

The reference is to Westgate River Ranch, a massive dude ranch-themed resort where everything's provided for family getaways from camping or lodging to restaurants, shopping and outdoor activities.

The restaurant will be casual enough that "you can dine in flip-flops," Severance said, but have a formal component as well.

"It will be good enough that people in Fort Myers will say, 'It's date night. I want to go to Babcock Ranch,'" he said.

Atlanta Braves still in the mix for North Port

By Zach Murdock STAFF WRITER Sarasota Herald-Tribune

The Braves are the only team considering a proposed spring training complex at the future West Villages town center at U.S. 41 and River Road.

The Atlanta Braves will have a stadium all to themselves if the organization decides to sign a deal for a proposed new spring training complex in North Port.

Although three or four other clubs had expressed an interest this year in sharing a potential new stadium and practice facilities, those teams have made other arrangements and only the Braves are still considering Sarasota County, West Villages General Manager Martin Black said recently.

The shift comes as Braves executives, Black and county officials continue to analyze possible designs and financing for the estimated \$100 million baseball complex pitched as the heart of the planned West Villages "town center" development on 100 to 150 acres near U.S. 41 and River Road.

Black and county economic development leaders had pursued a two-team training complex because the potential state grants for the project would jump dramatically over a one-team deal - from \$20 million to \$50 million, they have said. Black again declined to disclose the other teams that were in the mix.

"We had considered other teams, but frankly, those organizations have either made new deals or renewed their leases where they are now," Black said. "So rather than try to chase two birds, we're focused on this one opportunity."

With other teams out of the running, the Braves are "reworking and looking at their program as far as design and cost estimates," Black said.

The Braves plan to relocate to a new spring training center in 2019 after the team's lease ends at Disney's Wide World of Sports in Orlando, where the club has trained since 1997. During the summer, the team hired consultants to work with West Villages designers on plans for the potential layout for the stadium and new commercial district. Those plans should be available in the spring, Black said.

Despite initial indications that negotiations needed to be speedy, Braves vice chairman John Schuerholz wrote to county officials in the summer that the team had delayed its ambitious 2018 moving plans by a year by signing a lease extension at the Disney complex. The team is using that flexibility to study its options, and possible deals that might exist throughout the state before making any formal proposals.

Within the past few months, team executives said publicly they were considering sites in Sarasota and Collier counties. The Braves' long-time spring training home, Palm Beach County, also may be a consideration. The Sarasota County Commission remains the only government to have voted in favor of negotiating with the team.

"They have not left Sarasota, even though I know it's been awhile since our last update," Black said. "The team wants to keep a couple options open for themselves, and that obviously makes good business sense for them. But we're still in negotiations and are hopeful."

Black and county administrators also are hopeful the Braves' announcement in September that it will move its Class A minor league affiliate to Florida is a sign of its long-term commitment to the state. The agreement calls for the team to play at Osceola County Stadium in Kissimmee, former spring training home of the Houston Astros, through 2020. The move could create the opportunity to relocate the minor league team to the potential North Port stadium, Black suggested.

"That's a positive sign, because ultimately for anyone who watches baseball, that's an opportunity for year-round play, not just the customary spring training window," he said. "So we took that as a very positive sign for the Braves to bring that team to Florida."

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