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Bath school board tackles communication meeting issues

BY MIKE BOLLINGER • STAFF WRITER

WARM SPRINGS — Communication is a key to success for any organization, and the Bath County School Board discussed ways to improve communication both among themselves and with administration during a Tuesday work session.

“I think it’s good to have a clear understanding about where your role starts and stops and where my role starts and stops,” superintendent Sue Hirsh said to open the meeting.

By definition, Hirsh said, the school board is a policy-making body while the superintendent carries out the day-to-day operations of the school system.

Hirsh said when situations or problems are brought to board members’ attention, she believed it was important to follow the chain of command when discussing those with administration. “That gives everyone respect and the opportunity to do their part to resolve these,” she said. “It concerns me when board members don’t go directly to someone who can do something about a problem.”

Chair Dr. Ellen Miller said at times, people don’t feel it does any good to follow the chain. She asked if board members should approach Hirsh or the school principal with issues.

“You should go to the shortest distance between two points,” Hirsh replied. “Go wherever the solution is to solve the problem at the lowest possible level.”

Board member Cathy Lowry said if a decision involves a “controversial or radical” change, she believed board members should be told so they can address it when community members talk to them. “It would be nice to know it’s coming,” she said. “Board members need to know when a situation is addressed.”

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Kirk Billingsley, of Big Fish Cider Company, inspects a glass of cider. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

Bright future for golden beverage

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Cider is making a comeback, and Kirk Billingsley of Monterey is leading the return of cider to Highland County.

After years of growing apples and making cider at his home near Vanderpool, Billingsley plans to capitalize on cider’s comeback by founding Big Fish Cider Company.

The commercial cidery is being constructed on Spruce Street in the circa 1920 Maple Restaurant and Warner Theater, a landmark building that has been vacant for years.

Big Fish Cider Co. will be the fruition of Billingsley’s vision to help slake the growing thirst of the local foods movement. Market share of the clear, golden beverage is skyrocketing so much that big beer companies have begun selling cider nationally. But the real demand lies locally and regionally, as consumers increasingly prefer to buy products that are grown and made closer to home.

Billingsley, a lifelong Highland resident, has worked many years on the local level to reverse Highland’s declining business activity as a member and former chair of the Economic Development Authority.

He began planning his business about five years ago. He said he had no idea he would go into the cider busi-

ness when he and his wife, Kim, bought the property less than 10 years ago to house her accounting office in a section of the structure that was built as a pharmacy in 1898.

He remembers the late Jay Hull saying the building was worth more in pieces because, like so many Monterey buildings of the period, it was built mainly of wormy chestnut.

Billingsley named Big Fish Cider Co. after the huge rainbow trout sign on the roof that Highland artist Bud Cook repainted last summer. Cook’s work, featured in The Recorder 2014 Fall Guide, was part of an exterior renovation that included new siding and a new roof. The building will be painted this spring.

Rexrode Masonry began construction in January but was delayed by weather, Billingsley said. The facility taking shape this spring and summer will consist of a production area where the theater’s old auditorium and stage were located. Cold storage, grinding and pressing equipment, fermentation tanks, finishing tank, bottling machine and filtration unit will go in the production area and a bonded bottle storage area.

A lab will be equipped with testing equipment in the former Alpine Banquet Room, adjoining the theater lobby, that will serve as a tasting room. The old theater

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RECORDER Spotlight

Congrats to the Christmas Mother and business of the year, as chosen by the Bath County chamber. See page 30.

The Mill Gap Ruritan Club and volunteers brought Maple Festival to seniors in Staunton and Fishersville last week. What a great idea! See photos, page 2



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projection room upstairs eventually will house office space.

Billingsley, 54, chief financial officer at Pendleton Community Bank, grew up in Monterey. He remembers as a child seeing the movie "Flipper" in the old theater. His father, the late Thaine Billingsley, M.D., was Highland's physician for decades and introduced his son to cider making. His mother, Anita, lives in Harrisonburg.

While making plans for the business, Billingsley visited numerous cideries, including Foggy Ridge in Floyd and Castle Hill in Albermarle. Last fall he traveled to three cideries in Massachusetts and to the Cider Days festival there. Capital for the project was secured when Billingsley made a private offering and gathered resources from 16 mostly local investors.

Big Fish plans to produce and sell 1,800 gallons of cider the first year, with pressing to begin this fall. David Glendinning of Monterey will manage day-to-day operations as Billingsley continues his work at the bank. Kat Rutt is designing bottle labels for different varieties to include dry, semi-dry and raspberry cider, with the raspberries to be supplied in part by Church Hill Produce.

Business opening is planned for Wintertide, with introduction of a spiced winter cider.

Real cider is a world apart taste-wise from the freshly squeezed apple juice that grocery stores sell as cider in clear plastic jugs during the fall, Billingsley said.

Cider is deeply rooted in American history, Billingsley noted. In America 150 years ago, cider would traditionally be served when friends and families dined together, he said. Back then, Americans favored cider, the drink made from fermented apple juice, over wine and beer.

Cider arrived with European settlers. They brought apple seedlings, seeds, and the knowledge of how to make cider. Unlike grapes, apples thrived in the colonies. Orchards were started. Cider making was a way to preserve the apple's nutrients throughout the year, and was safer to drink than contaminated water.

Cider had a foothold in early American family farms. Cider presses were as common as the custom of helping a neighbor squeeze a barrel or two of cider to put away in the cellar for the winter.

During the mid to late 1800s, the Industrial Revolution crossed the Atlantic and began transforming America from rural to urban. People moved from their farms, orchards, and cellars to cities and towns for the manufacturing jobs new industries required.

By then, German immigrants brought with them the craft of brewing beer. The chief ingredients, barley and hops, could be grown in only one season. By comparison, a newly planted apple tree takes a decade to bear fruit. Beer took over as the nation's alcoholic beverage of choice. But cider was still made in the more mountainous regions where apple trees flourished.

Prohibition in 1920 dealt the next blow to cider. What were once cider apples were now going to produce markets and canneries. There was suddenly a glut of apples. Farmers cut down their cider orchards to grow more profitable crops.

Prohibition was lifted in 1933, but by then the cider orchards were few and far between. Barley was planted. Beer rebounded. Meanwhile, back on family farms where orchards survived, cider continued to be pressed and barrels went into the cellars.

Up until about 10 years ago, even family

farms were making less and less cider. A modern family farm takes fewer workers. A 55-gallon barrel of cider would go bad before it could be consumed. Some of the knowledge of cider making was disappearing along with the older generation.

Cider is returning to its former prominence for good reasons, Billingsley said. Apples still thrive on American soil. Consumers demand foods that are more natural, more carefully made, and flavors unique to places where they are grown. Heirloom apple varieties are once again being grown in quantities.

Cider's comeback is just now starting. A lot of cider makers are using any apple they can find. More careful cider makers are searching out the right cider apples.

"These craftsmen are going beyond simply squeezing the apples, putting the barrels away, and hoping for the best," Billingsley said. "We now understand the science of the fermentation and appreciate the artistry that can be integrated to make some truly wonderful ciders.

"We carefully make ciders with American heirloom apples, taking this appreciation of the tradition of cider making, and adding the scientific knowledge of fermentation," he continued. "With that, we at Big Fish Cider Company are students of cider, can bring artistry into the production producing flavors and ciders that are ready to once again be the drink of choice when you have family and friends over for dinner."

Billingsley says his path to opening Big Fish Cider Co. has been long and steady.

He recalled that when he was six, his parents bought an old homestead outside of Monterey, on the way up Monterey Mountain. There were eight or nine apple trees of the same types commonly found all over Highland at the time. He remembers one tree in particular. He was seven or eight when he would climb up the trunk, sit back on a limb and take naps.

Now considered antique, heritage or heirloom, the apples from those trees were Highland favorites because of their flavor and because they grew well in these mountains, he said.

"That's why they were grafted and planted on farms and homesteads all over Highland," Billingsley said. "Of course at six years old, I had no understanding of the varieties, I just knew I liked the apples. And in particular I liked the fresh squeezed cider that came from those apples.

"Dad would gather up the windfalls in the fall, load them up, and take them to our neighbors, Punk and Henry Hevener's Farm. They had an old press and grinder, like many farms all over the Alleghenies had at that time.

"Dad would bring back a half barrel or so of cider and just set it on the north side of the house to keep it cool. It had an old wooden spigot on the barrel, and I still clearly remember getting off the school bus on a crisp October day and dropping my things in the house, grabbing a glass and running out to the barrel. That brown liquid would fill the glass and the aroma would hit my nose long before the glass touched my lips. The first taste of that cider was amazing with the sweetness competing with the tartness of the apples, both perfectly balanced.

"Dad would say he liked it best after about two weeks, when the cider would bite his tongue. Of course, that soon became my favorite too ... but a few days later the taste of vinegar would soon start encroaching on the flavor of the cider until it finally



Billingsley stands in the production area formerly occupied by the Warner Theater auditorium. (Recorder photos by John Bruce)

became dominated by the taste of vinegar, but for that few week period of time ... it was magical."

During college, Billingsley was returning home one October and called ahead to ask if his father had made cider, and he had not that year.

"So I thought I would surprise him and stopped and bought cider in Harrisonburg. Two jugs, one to drink when I got home and one he could hold back a couple of weeks.

"When I got home we opened the jug and poured the first glass, my excitement ended. What I tasted was the most insipid excuse for apple juice I have ever had. It was incomprehensible to me. I had only had one type of cider in my life. Cider made from the trees around our house. Why is there a difference?

"Thus I began the first real research I had ever done that wasn't part of a requirement for school. I started researching apples. I learned that the difference in the cider was the difference in apples.

"I learned about the older varieties, typically higher in acid, which gives it its tartness, and I learned that commercial orchards were more interested in apples that were large, pretty, would stand up to rough handling without bruising, and would keep on store shelves. They really didn't care about flavors. Most of their requirements were all about looks. In that day and time, a mother would not want to come home and fill the fruit basket with small spotty fruit. People wanted big, beautiful apples.

"Of course I didn't know what kind of apples were growing back in Monterey, but I knew they were good. So I took a grafting class from a professor at JMU by the name of Elwood Fisher. He was a well-known apple collector and a good storyteller to boot.

"Thus began my next phase of the quest



The cider brand sits in the entry door window.

for apple knowledge, grafting and saving trees. Of course I picked up every book on apple cider that I could find. And all of them had sections on hard cider production, which I couldn't care less about."

Billingsley moved back to Monterey in 1993 and found out Rick Lambert had a cider press that he was gracious enough to loan.

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"My wife, Kim, saw how much I loved it and the next fall bought one for me on our anniversary. Soon thereafter, on a particularly good apple year, after I had given cider to everyone I knew and was still making cider, with nowhere to put it, I revisited the hard cider sections and decided to give it a try.

"I put some in our basement and forgot about it. We had friends drop by at the Maple Festival that year, while our daughter, Hayley, a baby at that time, was taking her afternoon nap. I told them about cider making and remembered the cider in the basement. I brought the jug up we all had a glass and it was wonderful.

"That began the next phase of my quest for apple knowledge, hard cider. For years I experimented, making mistake after mistake, and dumping gallons upon gallons in my driveway, until about five or six years ago when I really got serious about cider making. It happened to be the same year that my wife said that never again was I going to make cider in our basement, after getting fed up with the smell of fermenting cider permeating her house for about a week.

"So a friend, Nicho Beverage, and I built a fermentation room within the old Maple Restaurant building in town, where I could control the temperature, and made cider to my heart's content without the smell bothering anybody," he said.

"I have tried more recipes than I can ever count — different apple blends, different yeasts, different additives — and I think I make a pretty good product. In fact, I have tasted lots of ciders from around the world, and I some of the best cider I have ever had, has been made with Highland County apples," he explained.

"Our elevation causes cooler nights, which on several varieties, causes more intense flavors. So I now know after all this time why the apples I ate as a six-year-old, and the cider my father used to make, was so much better than what I have found elsewhere. And I am ready to show that knowledge off and make some wonderful Highland County ciders," Billingsley said.

Billingsley's fascination with apple varieties led him to discover why, just as you would not use grapes from a supermarket to make a wine, you would not use supermarket varieties of apples to make cider.

"There are qualities you look for when choosing an apple to eat fresh that may be different than the qualities to make good cider. Some of the apples we use are excellent eating apples, some, not so much, but it's the contribution to the cider we are looking for, the blend of different apples and what each variety can add," he said.

"Galas, Honeycrisp, Granny Smith, the Red and Golden Delicious are supermarket favorites, due to qualities other than simply

flavor. They pack well, they ship well, they don't bruise easily, thick skins, and pretty apples.

"Good eating apples typically have a good mix of sweetness and tartness but for cider there is more complexity that we are looking for. The fermentation process removes the sweetness of the apples as the yeast converts sugar to carbon dioxide and alcohol. What's left is the acid — tartness.

"Cider makers are looking for aromatic qualities that will come through in the final product, and add complexity to the flavors other than just the acid. These qualities can be found in apples such as Golden Russets, Hewes Crab, Grimes Golden, Baldwins, Northern Spy and others. It's hard to find these apples in a supermarket or in most commercial orchards.

"Often these apples are not easily grown, which is another reason you don't find them in commercial orchards or in supermarkets. They often are not reliable bearers, or heavy bearers. They can be downright irritating to grow, but when they do produce apples in quantity and you can make cider from them, you will soon forgive that tree that you threatened with a chainsaw.

"Not only is the variety important but so is the method in which they are grown; most commercial orchards are about big, beautiful spotless apples, and to that end, they fertilize and spray fungicides, insecticides and other chemicals.

"I bet you don't even care what the apple that went into the cider looks like. Do you care that it had blemishes? Do you care that a bug took a bite out of that apple in the early summer and now there is a scar on the apple?"

"For cider making, we don't like the fungicides because (they) can interfere with the yeast and hurt fermentation; we don't like nitrogen fertilizers in the apples, it can speed up the fermentation too fast. Apples grown in low input orchards make very good cider. It's all about the apples," he explained.

"Apples grown in the mountains are often more flavorful as the cool nights and warm sunny days, and intensify the color and flavor of several of the varieties. Also, picking them at ripeness makes a big difference. Commercial orchards typically pick them two weeks prior to ripeness since they are more firm and will keep longer.

"Many cideries buy apple juice concentrate so they can produce cider year round. We only make cider from fresh apples, and we source as many apples locally as we can. Locally grown apples make a big difference in our ciders," Billingsley said.

Big Fish Cider Co. grows some of its own apples, but Billingsley plans on buying apples locally and hiring local people to pick them. He encourages farmers and landowners to grow varieties for ciders. For information, contact Billingsley at (540) 468-2827.

BATH COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
PUBLIC NOTICE
HEARING ON SETTING OF
TAX LEVIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2016

In accordance with Sections 58.1-3007, 58.1-3008, and 58.1-3506 of the Code of Virginia, as amended, notice is hereby given that the Bath County Board of Supervisors will conduct a public hearing on proposed tax levies for the Fiscal Year 2016 on Tuesday, April 14, 2015, at approximately 7:00 p.m. or as soon thereafter as possible in Room 115 of the Courthouse, 65 Courthouse Hill, Warm Springs, Virginia 24484. This public hearing on proposed tax levies will follow a public hearing scheduled at 7:00 p.m. or as soon thereafter as possible held the same evening in the same location on the proposed Fiscal Year 2016 Bath County Annual budget, including the Fiscal Year 2016 Bath County Public Schools budget.

A PUBLIC HEARING ON PROPOSED TAX LEVIES FOR
FISCAL YEAR 2016 FOR THE FOLLOWING CLASSES
OF PROPERTY IN BATH COUNTY, VIRGINIA:

1. Setting a tax levy of \$0.48/\$100 of assessed value on real estate, public service corporation property, and manufactured homes as defined in Section 36-85.3 of the Code of Virginia. The comparable tax levy for the present fiscal year 2015 is \$0.48/\$100 of assessed value. No Tax Rate Increase.
2. Setting a tax levy of \$0.35/\$100 of assessed value on tangible personal property and on machinery and tools as set forth in Section 15-8 of the Bath County Code, other than manufactured homes as set forth above. The comparable tax levy for the current fiscal year 2015 is \$0.35/\$100 of assessed value. No Tax Rate Increase

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED TAX LEVIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2016

DISTRICTS	REAL ESTATE	PERSONAL PROPERTY
CEDAR CREEK.....	\$0.48 per \$100 assessed value.....	\$0.35 per \$100 assessed value
MILLBORO.....	\$0.48 per \$100 assessed value.....	\$0.35 per \$100 assessed value
VALLEY SPRINGS.....	\$0.48 per \$100 assessed value.....	\$0.35 per \$100 assessed value
WARM SPRINGS.....	\$0.48 per \$100 assessed value.....	\$0.35 per \$100 assessed value
WILLIAMSVILLE.....	\$0.48 per \$100 assessed value.....	\$0.35 per \$100 assessed value

At its meeting on **Tuesday, May 12, 2015, at approximately 7:30 p.m. or as soon thereafter as possible**, the Board of Supervisors will meet in Room 115 of the Courthouse, 65 Courthouse Hill, Warm Springs, Virginia to consider **the adoption of the Fiscal Year 2016 annual County Budget, School Budget, and to set the appropriate levies subject to local taxation.**

Bath County intends to comply with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Should you need special assistance or accommodations in order to participate in the public hearings or meetings, please contact the County Administrator's Office at least two working days before the hearings or meetings (540-839-7221). BY: Ashton N. Harrison, County Administrator/ Clerk to the Bath County Board of Supervisors

