



The Fort and Student Prince plans to open casual beer garden next month

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Heriberto "Herbie" Flores, left and Rudi R. Scherff, inside the new Student Prince Beer Garden which is under construction at 1600 Main Street.

The Republican / Mark M. Murray

SPRINGFIELD - Rudi R. Scherff, managing partner of the **Student Prince Cafe and the Fort Dining Room**, is tired of seeing people sitting in their cars, waiting for traffic to clear so they can leave the

downtown parking garages visible from his family's well-known German restaurant.

"At the end of the work day, after a performance at CityStage or a game at the MassMutual Center. I see it all the time." Scherff said recalling trips to Germany where lively beer gardens are part of the culture.

"Wouldn't it be better to see all those people sitting outside, enjoying some beer and sausages?"

That might happen as soon as next month. Scherff hopes to open the **Fort's** German beer garden, tentatively called 1600 **Biergarten**, by late June. The name comes from the beer garden's new home, 1600 Main St., a former five-and-dime turned unemployment office turned troublesome Asylum night club.

It'll feature German beer and a bar menu of smaller-portioned German food, like wursts, and some other dishes from around the world, including Latin cuisine inspired by Scherff's friendship, and partnership, with Heriberto Flores, president of the **Farm Workers Council**. The Farm Workers Council owns not only the building with the beer garden but the building where the Fort is located, among other downtown properties.

"We are going to have Spanish food, like **tapas**, little things you can eat with your hands while you socialize with friends," Flores said.

Scherff smiled.

"It's a Germanic-Hispanic beer garden for the 21st century," he said. "We are even going to have wi-fi."

The Asylum closed in 2004. In 2009, the city bought the property for \$630,000, and in 2011, the city spent \$1.3 million in state and local funds to demolish the rear two-thirds of the building and gut the remaining 13,573 square feet, remove asbestos and install a sprinkler system in the unfinished shell.

The New England Farm Workers Council bought the building last year for \$450,000. It was the only bid received at the city auction.

Workers are transforming most of the interior into a restaurant with a kitchen and new bathrooms. Scherff said he's ordered long communal tables from Germany.

"These are not *like* the tables you would find in Germany — these *are* the tables you would find in Germany."

Scherff said the restaurant will seat about 120 inside and up to 1,000 people outside in what is now a parking lot. He figures he'll have to hire 20 to 35 employees to staff it, most of them part-time. Scherff declined to discuss how much he has invested in the venture.

Flores said the front part of the building will be rented out to another entity in accordance with the Farm Worker's agreement with the city.

"We need storefronts with something in them," Flores said. "This isn't about the casino coming or not coming. This is about doing something now with what we have."

Business downtown is OK, he said. But happy hour has been thinning out for years, Scherff said. The informal beer garden atmosphere is perfect for after work or after a show, he said.

"We just want to get more people moving around downtown," he said. "We want to give people options."

The 1600 Biergarten also will give Scherff options when people come looking for event space. He's had to turn parties away because the function rooms at The Fort are filled or are not big enough.

Exterior of the new Student Prince Beer Garden at 1600 Main St. in downtown Springfield.

The Republican / Mark M. Murray

He and Flores also promised music, not of the oomph-pah-pah variety.

Beer gardens are trendy. In Chicopee, the **Munich Haus** opened an outdoor patio beer garden last summer and is doing well. The **Hoffbrauhaus** in West Springfield has one, as well.

Flores and Scherff even led a research excursion to **Wolff's Biergarten** in Albany, N.Y., which opened in 2009.

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