

East Coast cities vie for Deschutes Brewery

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News that Deschutes Brewery executives came courting in Roanoke, Virginia, this fall sparked a Facebook campaign aimed at sending much love to the Bend-based brewer, the nation's seventh-largest craft brewer and the 12th largest overall.

The Deschutes 2 Roanoke (<https://www.facebook.com/Deschutes2Rke/?fref=ts>) Facebook page attracted 1,000 followers in its first 48 hours, and Wednesday counted more than 4,000.

A Twitter user, @Deschutes2Rke (<https://twitter.com/Deschutes2Rke>), inspired Michael Galliher to create the Facebook campaign.

"This is a way of not only bringing a nationally known business organization to Roanoke," Galliher, a Roanoke County court clerk, said Wednesday, "but also a way to encourage our economy and have an economic impact through not only job creation but tourism."

Deschutes Brewery is likely to announce the location of its new production brewery on the East Coast next year, brewery founder and CEO Gary Fish said Tuesday. The company goal, said brewery President and Chief Operating Officer Michael LaLonde in April, is brewing and shipping out of an East Coast facility by 2019.

Deschutes Brewery executives for months have stirred the economic development pot in several cities, holding out the prospect of 100 or more jobs, increased tourism and tasty beverages for thirsty locals and elected officials. In interviews, Fish and LaLonde have avoided any hint of what location, if any, has an edge.

"We would rather be more public, but we want to make sure the process is respected and we have the ability to negotiate in good faith with everyone," Fish said. "It would certainly simplify our lives a lot once this becomes public; I think we'll all breathe a little easier."

Their movements, however, are tracked in the media in places like Asheville, North Carolina; Roanoke, Virginia; and the South Carolina cities of Greenville and Charleston.

The Roanoke Times newspaper editorialized several times in favor of Deschutes Brewery locating in the Star City. An editorial addressed directly to LaLonde cited the relatively small but burgeoning craft beer scene in Roanoke, a metropolitan area of about 308,000 in southwest Virginia, and its proximity to the Blue Ridge Parkway and Interstate 81, which pass on opposite sides of the city.

"We are certainly not a community suffering from 'brewery fatigue,' as some say they are," according to The Roanoke Times' editorial. "Craft beer is still something of a novelty here. But we are starting to create something of a 'beer culture' we think is really cool — and which you would instantly define."

Inspired by the editorial, a 63-year-old teetotaling Baptist gospel-songwriter and grocery cashier, Steve Primo, of Montvale, Virginia, wrote a song, "Deschutes, a Brewery for Roanoke." He said a co-worker from the seafood counter, Jay McAllister, provided lead guitar and transferred the song from Primo's tape recording to CD. Primo

mailed copies to his brother in Missouri, who forwarded a copy to Deschutes Brewery, which tweeted a response (<https://twitter.com/DeschutesBeer/status/659069257972510720/photo/1>) Oct. 27.

Primo said the song is the first of a trilogy. He delivered the second installment, “Deschutes Came to Roanoke, a Redneck Conversion,” on Monday to McAllister with the hope it’s ready soon for release.

In “Redneck Conversion,” a man “is down and out, his woman left him,” so he turns on the country radio station and hears Primo’s first song. “Send me one of everything you make,” sings Primo’s protagonist, and when he sips from his first bottle of Deschutes beer, he finds it tastes better than fine wine.

He burns his rebel flag, destroys his Garth Brooks records, pours out his Pabst Blue Ribbon and marries a sophisticated woman. In short, “he becomes a Deschutes drinker,” Primo said.

Although he’s never tasted real beer, Primo said he hopes his songs show the welcome awaiting Deschutes Brewery and attract attention to his songwriting talent, as well.

Deschutes Brewery products are available four hours away in Northern Virginia, but not in Roanoke.

Fish said the brewery team that undertook the site search expected some buzz about a new Deschutes Brewery operation possibly coming to town, but nothing like the outpouring of enthusiasm and public jockeying he’s seen.

“I think we all imagined something like this,” he said. “Personally, I didn’t think it would get to the extent that it has, people writing songs about us and social media campaigns. I’m getting handwritten letters, some really sincere, heartfelt stuff, and that’s hard to ignore.”

Fish said the team pared the initial list of potential sites to 110, then visited 35, many of those visits documented by local media. Local media also reported on moves by local and state officials to secure property and create economic incentives to lure a brewery, conspicuously unnamed, to their areas. In mid-September, Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe downed a pint at the Deschutes Brewery & Public House during a swing through Western states to attract economic development to his state.

In Asheville, North Carolina, the Buncombe County commissioners in early October decided against selling 137 acres where an unnamed brewery had shown interest in building, according to the Citizen-Times newspaper. In Albemarle County, Virginia, near Charlottesville, the county board of supervisors approved a change in its comprehensive land use plan that made 35 acres available for an unnamed brewery, according to The Daily Progress on Oct. 4.

Fish would not comment directly on specific reports of economic incentive packages. He downplayed their significance measured against other factors.

“We’re trying to find the community with the best fit for us,” he said. “We need to make the best decision for us and negotiate the deal afterward. It’s an interesting blend. Whatever incentives are coming up are not playing as big a factor in our decision-making process as some people may want to think.”

Roanoke claims eight relatively small breweries and a young beer scene, said Chuck Garst, a partner in Big Lick Brewing Co. The first contemporary brewery opened there in 2000; another seven opened in the past three years, he said. A meeting of Roanoke’s brewers Tuesday produced a statement of support for Deschutes

Brewery. Roanoke, a former railroad hub, is trying hard to outshine Asheville, its rival farther south along the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“It seems like all the news is that it’s between Roanoke and Asheville,” Garst said.

Asheville, with a metropolitan area of about 440,000, has 21 breweries in and around the city and, like Roanoke and Bend, is a regional destination for outdoor recreation. The Asheville area is also where three Western brewing companies set up shop: New Belgium Brewing Co. and Oskar Blues Brewery, both of Colorado, and Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., of California. It’s also the last possible site reportedly visited by a Deschutes Brewery executive — in this case, LaLonde — around Oct. 22. He did not return a call Tuesday seeking comment.

Asheville is “a pretty broad, diverse brewing community,” Fish said. “We heard a lot of stories, both pro and con; do they want us, do they not want us? Michael went out there to find out what these people are really like and to be open and honest, from our standpoint. ... We don’t do rumor and innuendo very well. We’d rather talk to people and find out what they want.”

Fish said Deschutes Brewery is not aiming to play one community against another to get the best incentive package or deal concessions to bring its brewery to town. The checklist for possible sites ran to 100 categories, he said.

“We’re trying to be very respectful of these people,” Fish said. “We’ve examined some really outstanding communities. This is not easy for us. That being said, this is the process. If the worst you can say is, ‘These people are really nice; they have a nice community and they really want us to locate there,’ that’s not the worst thing in the world.

“The short end of that is that it’s good that this is a difficult decision.”

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