

# DAVE'S: Employees have reported underage drinking on occasion

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sent a clear message via Facebook.

"We have put trash cans out for them, asked them to put the trash in the cans, not to litter and to not do cookies on the lot, and to not drink, and to treat the property with respect. We are at the end of the rope," reads the post, which earned hundreds of likes, shares and comments. "Our words are falling on deaf ears. So parents, please inform your children if they hang out here to clean up and respect the property, or we will put a stop to the hangout."

The store monitors the area with surveillance cameras, but they seldom provide any conclusive information about the litterbugs. It's too dark to make out faces, Darlington said.

The spot can attract as many as 30 teens a night, said Dave's employee Bronson Cuzzort, who works the closing shift. Numbers tend to increase over the summer. Groups stay longer, sometimes until 3 or 4 a.m., even though the store closes at 11 p.m. and reopens again at 5:30 a.m.

"There's nowhere else for them to go," Cuzzort said. "It's a 21-and-over town."

Cuzzort said the employees have called the police to report underage drinking on occasion. They've stopped a few older members of the group from purchasing alcohol for minors.

The store's ability to keep teens safe and supervised, although limited, is among the reasons it lets the group congregate. Original owner Dave Walters, who passed away in December 2016, ardently supported the community's youth. Walters would spend summer afternoons in the baseball and softball stands, a hot dog in hand, cheering on the kids. He'd often allow the large, highly visible parking lot to be used for car wash fundraisers.

His wife Toni Walters, who now runs Dave's, cares about giving the teens a place to go. So, too, do neighbors of the store.

"They're just kids trying to have a good time. We all know what that's like," said Katie Jones, owner of Speakeasy Salon and Clothing Company, which occupies the former New York Richie's. Jones didn't realize she was located so close to a popular teen hangout spot when she opened the clothing store in June. Now, she knows better. She often finds gum stuck to the store's walls and cups on the roof.

"We want them to have a good



Teens gather below an electronic billboard in the parking lot of Dave's FoodMart on Wednesday.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

time, but I'm a mom, and I also want them to be respectful," she said.

The blockades between Speakeasy's lot and Dave's stemmed from her motherly concerns over safety. She said a few of her customers barely escaped injury after teens raced past. One night she even stayed late to monitor the teens driving "cookies" — tight continuous circles that can elicit screeching and smoke.

"I was afraid they'd lose control and hit one of their friends," she said. "In hindsight, I wish I would have called the police. I didn't realize it was becoming such an issue for everyone."

Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts said he's not aware of any ongoing criminal issues at Dave's.

"You get all groups, but generally speaking, they're pretty well-behaved," he said. Roberts said that loitering isn't criminal activity, but the business has the prerogative to ask anyone to leave. He added that the police would exercise more discretion over the property after hours, if that's what the business wanted.

The Facebook post has attracted the attention of REACH (Reaching Every Adult and Child through Hope) Ministries, a local organization that provides resources to teens at risk of alcohol and drug use, pregnancy and criminal activity. Darlington

said REACH contacted him about speaking with the teens.

Lee, who has been a Dave's hangout regular for more than two years, said there are distinct cliques that gather in the lot. She and her friends, who call themselves the "hicks," are the most consistent group. It's another pack — a beer-drinking, pot-smoking crowd made up mostly of young adults from Pilot Rock — that rolls through from time to time causing mess and noise, she said.

Lee personally picks up trash and puts it in the nearby can. And when the can is full, which is often, she leaves it nearby.

"Everyone who's here right now, we take care of the place," she said of the dozen teens bunched in the back of miscellaneous vehicles. "We even called the cops on one kid last night."

The kid in question had been shooting off illegal fireworks from the lot.

Lee's friend, Pendleton High School sophomore AJ Prutch, said that this is the second time teens from the other group had set off fireworks. He thinks that's what prompted the crackdown from Dave's management.

The Facebook comments were on his mind as he decided to report the fireworks to the police.

"We're more respectful than people think," Prutch said, adding

that he wouldn't want to see Dave's put an end to the hangout. "We've got backup spots, but this has just been the spot for years. It's the center of town. It's easy for everyone to meet."

Lee said that there are few public places for teens to go in Pendleton anymore.

"They took out the bowling alley," she said. "All we can do is go to Walmart or come here."

One reason they prefer the Dave's lot is the expanse of empty asphalt; it pairs well with the teens' car culture. Driving to Dave's in your own set of wheels is like a rite of passage, Lee said. "We know everyone by their vehicle."

They drive recklessly on occasion as a way of showing off, Prutch explained, adding that they discourage those who get too aggressive.

During the day, the Dave's teens all work jobs, Lee said. She plans to attend Blue Mountain Community College in the fall and aspires to become a veterinarian.

In the meantime, she will keep coming back to Dave's. And to those who think the group shouldn't be there, she offers this advice: "Just come on down and hang out with us. We're not haters."

Contact Emily Olson at [eolson@eastoregonian.com](mailto:eolson@eastoregonian.com) or 541-966-0809

# PERS: Can't reduce benefits already earned

Continued from 1A

adequately address the PERS increases from the state, I see those same strategies again at play in our future which is concerning for our students."

The rate decision has been monitored with interest, especially by those advocating for reforms to the state's pension system.

A Brighter Oregon, a coalition of state businesses that angled for spending reforms during the recently concluded legislative session, is one such observer.

"A more realistic assumption is an important first step toward unmasking the severity of the problem these rising PERS costs create for our state, schools and local governments," said Pat McCormick, spokesman for the group, "and ultimately for Oregon taxpayers left holding the bill for the pension system's growing unfunded liability."

House Minority Leader Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, said in a statement Friday that the vote "should serve as a sobering moment for our state's political leaders."

Earlier this week, a group appointed by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, to find ways to leverage state assets to chip away at the unfunded liability, held their first meeting. It has been charged with finding a way to shave \$5 billion from the unfunded liability and are reviewing the state's assets.

Lawmakers can't reduce benefits already earned, per a 2015 Oregon Supreme Court decision.

Some lawmakers, including many Republicans, propose modifying public employee benefits going forward as a way to cut down on the system's costs.

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