

Businesses, city get ready for

VIKES CAMP



Photo by John Cross

Scott Sandvig (left) and other members of a work crew from Mankato Tent and Awning erect one of several tents on Monday in preparation for the opening of the Minnesota Vikings pre-season training camp at Minnesota State University.

Tailgate party featured Thursday as players arrive

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Najwa Massad and her husband, John, aren't sure what kind of bump in business they will see when Vikings training camp starts later this week, but they're readying their new Massad's Mediterranean Grille near campus for any influx.

"Some of the Vikings go to the Massad's at River Hills Mall, so we're trying to let them know we're closer now," she said of their restaurant in a renovated strip mall on Monks Avenue near the intersection of Stadium Road.

The Massads have been putting advertising around the Minnesota State University where camp is held and sending out extra fliers and coupons. And they've put up some Vikings and

Massads flags near the intersection. "We're tucked back here a little. We thought people from out of town will look for the Vikings flags."

Massad said they will be able to have the staff they need for any bump in business. "The kids want more hours (of work) this time of year. And if we need to we'll bring family in to help," she said. "We're ready."

With his Weggy's on Campus in University Square, right across the street from MSU, Steve Wegman benefits as much as any business in town when camp is in session.

"We see an average of 30 to 40 percent increase in business," Wegman said.

"It's fun having the coaches and players come in — you feel like a little kid again, even

though they're half my age."

Wegman said the camp will feature more night scrimmages this year, something he thinks will help businesses. "The weekends and nights bring more crowds up here."

Weggy's has hired extra staff for what is just the start of their busy time. "We look at this as the buildup for the start of school. When camp's over, school starts. It's pretty much the same for everyone up here."

Wegman said that while camp is a boost, the visitors to camp don't mean all ideas will make money. "One year we got a Pepsi wagon outside and tried to sell hot dogs. I mean, how could you miss with that? I think we sold three, so you never know what's going to work."

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The 49th annual camp opens when players arrive Thursday with the first practices set for 10:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. Friday.

The influx of fans boosts business for many in town. Last year, a record 69,000 fans attended training camp. While many of those are local residents who make multiple visits, the three-week camp also draws fans from across the state and Midwest.

Events surrounding camp have been boosted considerably in recent years, including the Vikings Village, which sells memorabilia and beer and includes a kids play area. The addition of more food and drink at camp has cut some potential added business for area restaurants.

“There’s a lot more food at camp now,” said Chris Wiebers, manager of Applebee’s. He said the restaurant off of Highway 22 on the east side of town gets some bump from camp, but the real surge starts the third week in August when freshmen return to MSU.

Wiebers is more focused on another date on the calendar — a week from Saturday — when the new roundabout on Adams Street and Highway 22 opens, reuniting him with easy access to the motorists on the west side of 22.

“At least they’ll be able to get to me from the (River Hills) Mall. That will help a lot.”

He’ll have to wait another month after that for the second roundabout, on Madison Avenue and Highway 22, to open.

Wiebers said his business hasn’t been hit as hard by the construction as some others in the area. “We’re not a convenience stop so much. I’ve dropped (in business) but not drastic. If people want to come to me, they will.”

The Vikings tailgate party is from noon to 2 p.m. Thursday on campus, on the lawn across from the Julia Sears dorms, where players stay. There will be free parking in the nearby sunken lot.

Kathryn Reeder, brand manager of Visit Mankato, said it’s the best opportunity for fans to score a Vikings autograph. Vikings cheerleaders also will be on hand and there will be giveaways and other events.

“The players will be parking in the lot right next to there. They will see us. I think it will be

exciting for everyone.”

Last year’s inaugural tailgate party featured several sites from St. Peter to Mankato where fans gathered. “It was a little spread out — there wasn’t enough player interaction. We’re trying to make it a big, single event,” she said of this year’s effort.

Last year’s event was also marred by torrential rains.

“It was hard to even use any pictures from last year (to promote this) with everything soaking wet,” Reeder said.

The best-dressed fan at the event will win an autographed prize. And markers and posters will be available for a poster contest on site.

While this year’s camp is just getting underway, Reeder said plans are already moving for next year’s watershed camp.

“We have the 50th next year. We’ll make that very big.”



Vikings personnel unload training equipment from a semi-trailer on Monday in preparation for the the team’s pre-season training camp, which opens at MSU later this week. Players are scheduled to arrive Thursday.

Photo by John Cross