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INDOOR BAZAAR

DRAWS BROWSERS TO BOOTHS

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LADYSMITH -- Delores Luebker could browse the booths lining Virginia Bazaar all day, if only she could lose her husband.

"I love it. I get in here and I can't get out," said the 66-year-old shopper from Spotsylvania County. "I stay as long as I can if I can bypass my husband."

Luebker has visited the giant weekend flea market off Interstate 95 in Caroline County several times since it opened last spring. Now entering its second season, the bazaar hopes to lure more new customers from the Fredericksburg and Richmond areas and elsewhere.

Visitors say the variety draws them. On a recent weekend, vendors sold antiques, puppets, leather goods, ornamental flags, home decor, jam, cheese and vegetables.

Its location along I-95 helps the bazaar pull travelers from as far away as Maine, New York and Florida. Some of the vendors come long distances, as well, but most are within an hour or so of the Ladysmith site.

Moyer and her husband, Rolen, travel each weekend from their goat farm near Disputanta in Prince George County. They opened a booth in late October after looking for a way to market their Briar Patch goat cheese north of Richmond. "We'd been doing a lot of business in Washington - our cheese was served to Congress last week. We were having to drive up there to get the product out," said Virginia Moyer, whose product also is sold at Ellwood Thompson's Natural Market in Richmond.

The bazaar offers the Moyers a permanent satellite location. Vendors can leave their booths set up from week to week in the 67,000-square-foot facility. The indoor, climate-controlled environment is another plus.

"We've sold at the Fredericksburg fair, but the weather is always so unpredictable," Virginia Moyer said. "Here, it can be raining and you might not even know it."

Vendors operate from more than 350 indoor spaces and another 220 outdoor spots. The bazaar also boasts a food court complete with televisions for shoppers who want to take a break. Located on 100 acres, the site has parking for 1,800 cars.

Spaces range from \$60 to \$200 per weekend for a booth to as little as \$16 a day for an outdoor spot. Vendors can rent from weekend to weekend or receive discounts for paying for a month in advance.

Martha Johnson of Chesterfield County said the facility gave her an affordable way to expand her part-time ethnic clothing business. Johnson, 48, previously had worked out of her home and at festivals, including Richmond's 2nd Street Festival.

"I come and go, but everything here is stationary," she said, surrounded by leopard- and zebra-print hats and batik tapestries.

In essence a steel shell building, the bazaar is the byproduct of a Charlottesville-based storage company, C.W. Investments, which has self-storage facilities in Charlottesville, Harrisonburg, Stafford County and other locations.

Frank Thomasson, the bazaar's general manager, signed on to manage and market the venture after he sold a small publishing company in 1997. "At first, none of us started with any experience at all. We just had a notion," he said.

In about two years, investors raised \$4 million, researched similar operations and found a site that offered high visibility and a convenient location along I-95. "Most flea markets are off the beaten path. You have to work to get there," he said.

At its height last summer, the bazaar saw about 12,000 visitors per weekend, and Thomasson expects that figure to grow. The property has room for six similarly sized buildings.

"I knew the place was going to take off. There's a good flow here," said Herb Herther of Caroline, a 68-year-old antiques dealer who restores furniture and also sells glass figures and curio cabinets.

Caroline officials have yet to determine how much revenue the company generates for the county.

"There's more than just tax dollars that we get out of this," said Gary R. Wilson, Caroline's economic development director. "It brings a lot of people to Caroline. It's a way to get people here to show them what we have to offer."

Debra Collier, a flag vendor from Hanover County, said the bazaar benefits the community in other ways, too. Because the facility is open during church hours on Sundays, vendors have started their own nondenominational worship service. Donations taken during the service go toward area causes, such as providing food during the holidays and fuel-assistance this past winter.

"This community is good to us, so we want to give back," Collier said.

Thomasson said the company might open in other locations, though for now it is concentrating on Caroline.

"There's no question that we now have a pretty solid idea of how to do this," he said. "We've built a nice model."