

Mary Jo Bishop, owner of Steggies Bar, testimony for Senate Community, Economic and Recreational Development Committee Hearing

Oct. 4, 2023

Thank you, senators, for allowing me to tell you my personal story today about how important skill games are to my business. As you heard, my name is Mary Jo Bishop.

My husband and I own the 9th Ward Café in the City of Lebanon but everyone knows it as Steggies Bar. Steggies was the nickname of my grandfather who opened the bar in 1945. Back then the Bethlehem Steel Mill, located half a block from the bar, was operating at full capacity. People worked three shifts and customers would stand three deep in the bar at the shift changes. My grandparents had an apartment upstairs and earned a comfortable living from their business.

Fast forward 78 years and I now own the bar. When I was around 30, I took over Steggies from my parents. As we all know, with steel mill closures, there aren't steelworkers pouring into the place anymore. Where once there were 30 neighborhood bars in Lebanon, now there are only four. But we are making it.

Steggies truly is my family's blood, sweat and tears. Like my grandparents and my parents, my husband, Paul, and I work long hours each day, but we love the place and who doesn't want to earn a living doing something they love? We think of the bar as an extension of our living room. We have our regular customers, our karaoke night, our dart league. It is one of those places where everyone really does know your name.

When we can, we do things at the bar to bring in more customers. Eight years ago, we added skill games for that reason. People love them and it has benefited our family business in ways I couldn't imagine when we first set them up. People spend more time at the bar and so they buy more beverages. Sometimes, when they win a game, they give a generous tip to the bartender or even buy a round of drinks for the bar. On our end, we were using the money for repairs and improvements.

That was what I mainly came to expect from skill games until COVID when they saved Steggies. Like many other bars and restaurants, we were devastated by the required closing. Paul and I worried about how we were going to make it. After COVID people started trickling in again, but just as our customer base improved the economy slammed down hard on us. The cost of everything skyrocketed.

If we hadn't had our skill games, I'm not sure what would have happened. It's scary to think about. We now use the revenue our games generate to pay the bills, such as the building's heat. We have purchased equipment and spent money on the general upkeep of the bar. Now, as things continue to improve for us, I have been able to hire someone. And on a personal note, Paul and I can take a week's vacation for the first time. All thanks to skill games.

Just as important, we can give back to the community. We donate to many children's programs in the area, schools, playgrounds, plus the Humane Society and veterans' food drives. We also have a disabled grandson and make sure he has everything he needs.

Skill games have allowed us to do all of that. We take care of our family and try to help the community as much as possible.

Paul and my hope is the same as many small business owners. We want Steggies to be there for us until we decide to retire – just like my grandparents and my parents. And maybe another generation will want to take over.

Whatever happens, I know one thing for certain, the future of Steggies is tied to skill games. Without the games, there will be one more neighborhood bar gone.

Thank you very much.