



Elks flock to state's newest lodge in Bedford

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Published: May 24, 2011

BEDFORD — In the upstairs meeting room of the Elks National Home in **Bedford**, 15 newly initiated members of **Bedford Elks Lodge** 2844 line up to sign its constitution and bylaws to mark their first night.

With refreshments waiting just outside the door, laughter and friendly conversation fill the air as members socialize before heading home.

“You won’t find any better people,” says **Tom Scott**, an Elk who has lived in **Bedford** for 40 years.

This scene, like that of a family reunion, took place at the most recent meeting last Tuesday night — the lodge holds private gatherings twice a month and has since late 2005 when it was instituted.

As the newest **Elks lodge** in **Virginia**, the group has pulled in more than 750 members to date and is the fastest growing of 32 lodges in the state, leaders say.

The Benevolent and Protective Order of **Elks** has nearly 1 million members and more than 2,000 lodges, according to its website.

Bob Humphreys, a **Bedford** resident and exalted ruler of the lodge, said its involvement pertains to “all aspects of the community” with emphasis on youth and veteran outreach. He said the lodge’s growth in membership is among the highest in the country.

The average **Bedford** lodge member’s age is 73, he said.

“You need youth; that’s the one thing we need,” he said. “We’re just looking for people who want to be active.”

Humphreys said he joined to one day live at the Elks National Home, a residential retirement complex with a golf course and other amenities at an affordable price.

“Someday you might need a place to go,” said Raymond Farris, a county resident who was initiated last week.

While the lodge has seen a surge in members, leaders say an obvious challenge is losing participants due to age. One member said frequent deaths cause the group’s number to fluctuate like a “yo-yo.”

Another challenge the lodge has addressed is building a new facility to call its own. Since its founding, it has paid rent to use the Elks National Home on Ashland Avenue, said John Owen, a Bedford resident and deputy of the Elks’ southwest district in Virginia.

Bedford City Council last year approved a conditional use permit for the lodge’s construction on five acres on Ashland Avenue within the Elks’ property. Humphreys said representatives of the Elks’ national board of trustees came to Bedford last week in part to sign over the deed for the land; members hope to break ground this summer.

Humphreys said he believes a new lodge would double membership.

“I’m hoping the new lodge will increase participation,” said Earl Agee, a member and ex-officer. “We need younger people.”

For acceptance into Elk membership, one must be at least 21, a U.S. citizen, believe in God and be of “good moral character,” according to the fraternal order’s website. An investigation process would then take place to clear the initiation; members invite prospective applicants.

The lodge sponsors a little league team, gives financially to organizations and provides scholarships, Humphreys said. For example, the Bedford lodge recently gave \$500 to the National D-Day Memorial for the purpose of educating students about World War II.

Joe and Patricia Lizior, a Bedford County couple, said they joined the lodge this past Tuesday to get involved in the community. They moved to the area from Georgia three years ago and “have heard so many good things about the Elks,” Patricia said. She is retired and has the time to get involved.

“It seems like one of the better ways to go,” she said.

Owen said participants have embraced civic opportunities and are very active in asking friends and neighbors to join.

“We try to make our communities a better place to live,” Owen said. “The success of our lodge has been our members.”

“It’s just a good group of people,” Humphreys said, “a lot of fun people.”