Abortion protests disrupt businesses

By MUKUL VERMA
Advocate business writer

Caught in the crossfire of sometimes volatile abortion protests on Bennington Avenue, most managers expressed mild frustration Thursday over the disruption of their businesses.

Some service businesses surrounding Delta Women's Clinic have rescheduled meetings while restaurants have experienced a sales slump, managers said.

Business, however, was good for towing companies and a refreshment stand that popped up to help protesters and spectators survive the crunching heat.

The clinic, located off heavily-traveled College Drive on Bennington, is the target of Operation Rescue's pro-life protests.

On Thursday afternoon, blistering Baton Rouge heat wilted some protesters, who sought shelter under the shade of the area's few scattered trees.

While some protesters rested, the manager and an employee of Silver China restaurant showed concern over a decrease in sales.

Wei Yu, Silver China employee, directed protesters away from the restaurant's sparsely occupied parking lot. The restaurant, which has been open since April 1, is located on Bennington across from its intersection with a rougher area. A number of customers have stayed away to avoid the crowd, Yu said.

Ann Lu, restaurant manager, said she had heard the protests would continue for six weeks and that has frightened her.

Operation Rescue has scheduled protests for Thursday. A few protesters are expected in continue demonstrating next week.

"I'm pro Baton Rouge. The only thing they are doing is yelling at each other. They are not accomplishing anything," said Todd Hensel, local resident.

"We lost all those customers," Lu said. "It's sad."

Gino's Restaurant, next door to Silver China, has seen a drop in lunchtime customers, but the dinner business has not been hurt by the protests, said Kevin Kimball, Gino's manager.

Overall, sales have been down, he said.

The protesters are choosing fast-food over Gino's sit-down Italian meals. Media reports of the crowd have forced Gino's regular customers to stay away, Kimball said.

At the Louisiana Realtors Association Inc., across the street from Silver China and on the same side of the street as the clinic, the roar of the protesters has distracted the staff, said Malcolm Young, LRA executive director.

Advance notice of the protests allowed the LRA to reschedule most meetings. The group did hold a meeting Wednesday, but made special arrangements to have participants park in another lot, Young said.

The LRA's parking lot's gates are closed and locked. The group is concerned about the boost in liability from protesters that may be injured on the LRA's property, Young said.

Some protesters sat and slept under trees in the LRA lot Thursday.

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But where there is a crowd, there is an opportunity for business.

Two men have opened a refreshment stand in a side entryway of Weekends' night club.

The refreshment stand's menu includes doughnuts and coffee in the morning and lemonade, soft drinks and hot dogs in the afternoon, said Frank Fincanac, Weekends manager.

Fincanac and his partner John HACKABAY, counted sales of $30 on Tuesday and $15 on Wednesday. Fincanac said he expects business to grow as the crowds swell.

Instead of complaining about profiteering, protesters have been thankful the refreshment stand is open, Fincanac said.

The pro-life protesters have been more liberal spenders, said Fincanac, who is providing a special media discount.

Members of the media were everywhere. Television cameras were perched atop Wilson Inn. Press reporters worked the crowd for information. Television reporters waited for their turns on camera.

Businesses called towing services to remove unwanted cars, keeping at least one company busy.

Towing of vehicles in the protest area has generated about $1,000 in revenues for Doug Reed Wrecker Service this week, owner Doug Reed said.

On Thursday, Doug Reed Wrecker had towed about 20 vehicles by 3 p.m. The company towed about five vehicles a day from Monday through Wednesday, Reed said.

Calls for towing are coming from individual businesses and owners, he said.

"We could have towed many, many more, but we have limited it to the ones that are causing problems," including blocked driveways, Reed said.

One protester took a different tack, choosing to sleep with pro-choice or pro-life forces, but to stand up for Baton Rouge.

"I'm pro Baton Rouge," said Todd Hensel, a local resident who is a student at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond.

Hensel held up a sign that read, "Operation Rescue. Go Home. You're costing taxpayers money. $500,000."