



January 10, 2011

Sons of Italy lodge to become Daher's next dealership

By Jill Harmacinski
jharmacinski@eagletribune.com

LAWRENCE — Two decades ago, Charles Daher said, people told him he was crazy when he decided to open a car dealership off Interstate 495 in Lawrence. But in that 20 years, Commonwealth Motors steadily grew to become one of the top 10 dealerships in New England.

Now, the Daher automotive empire is about to get even bigger.

Daher is buying the nearby Sons of Italy lodge at 155 Marston St. and plans to open another car dealership on the 5-acre site. Daher, Commonwealth Motors president, said he's been eyeing the property for years and is pleased to expand the family business right down the street.

"Things are easier to manage and run more efficiently when they are close together," said Daher, whose workers include his wife, his four grown children and three sons-in-law.

"I was born and raised in Lawrence. I feel confident expanding here," said Daher, a 1967 graduate of Central Catholic High School.

With a current inventory of 1,000 cars and trucks, Commonwealth Motors sells Chevrolet, Kia, Honda and Volkswagen products. Daher can't say what make of cars the new



Commonwealth Motors bought the Sons of Italy property on Marston Street in Lawrence.

Pictured from left are, Allison Daher Belliveau, Melissa Daher Taylor, Charles Daher, Kimberly Daher Millman and Charles Daher III. Angie Beaulieu

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dealership will sell, explaining he's still in franchise talks.

But the sale of the 12,804-square-foot Sons of Italy building, reportedly changing hands for \$2.55 million, will not be the end of the fraternal lodge dedicated to sharing and preserving Italian heritage.

After the anticipated March 1 closing on the property, the Sons will have one year to relocate elsewhere, under the terms of the agreement reached with Daher. With roots in Lawrence dating back to 1919, the Sons of Italy lodge opened on Marston Street in 1982.

The group's next home will likely be in the neighboring city of Methuen, where many descendants of Italian immigrants have settled, said Armand Buonanno, Sons of Italy president.

"More than half of our members live in Methuen," he said.

Forty years ago, the Lawrence Sons of Italy lodge was the largest on the East Coast, boasting 1,200 members and driving the need for the large headquarters on Marston Street. Today, membership has shrunken 75 percent to 300 members, Buonanno said.

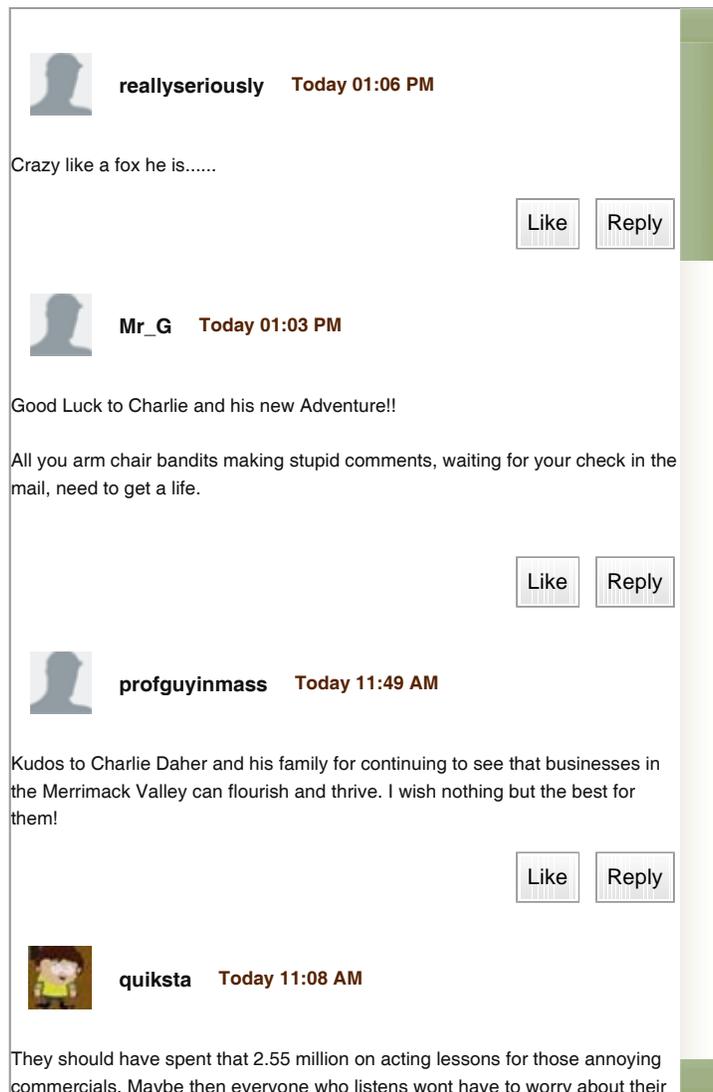
Members agreed to sell the building to Daher and leave Lawrence, provided they "got the right price and were given a year to move."

"With those two items, we considered the sale," Buonanno said.

Buonanno noted the bottom line "was very good, given this market." The property is assessed at \$889,200, according to city records.

A new home will also give the Sons an opportunity to change their mission a bit. In recent years, Buonanno said, the Sons have become more involved and partnered with other nonprofit community groups.

"This is an opportunity for us to downsize and get even more involved," Buonanno said. "To move away from the social aspect to more of a nonprofit community-oriented organization."



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City leaders are pleased with the sale, noting once the property becomes a dealership, tax payments will follow. The Sons of Italy was exempt from city property taxes.

"When you look around the country, dealerships have been closing their doors, but Charlie has continued to run a first-class operation in the city," said Patrick Blanchette, the city's economic development director. "The city of Lawrence is always first on his mind."

Daher acknowledges that he's expanding and spending millions in a difficult economy. He points to repeat and referred customers, who comprise 40 percent of his business, and loyal family members and employees as the keys to success.

"You can have the greatest ideas in the world. But if you don't have great people you are going no where with them," Daher said.

Daher said he plans to knock down the Sons of Italy lodge and spend about \$5 million on the new dealership building. Some \$4 million in improvements are also scheduled for dealership buildings on Commonwealth Drive, which abuts Marston Street, he said.

Daher is also hammering out a deal with Frank Coady, owner of Coady's Garage and Towing at 139 Marston St., who wants to purchase an acre of the Sons of Italy property to expand his neighboring operation.

"Frank and I are working together on it," Daher said.

It doesn't appear the Sons of Italy property will be Daher's last stop. He said he hopes to purchase the former Tombarello & Sons property at 207 Marston St., which has been marketed for \$4 million. After 50 years as a salvage yard, the property is contaminated with leads, PCBs and other heavy metals requiring cleanup.

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