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Covelli opens new Panera, sets sights on more stores

CANFIELD - Sam Covelli cut the ribbon to officially open his fifth Panera Bread restaurant in the area and then said he's considering opening more. "I'm always looking," Covelli said outside his newest restaurant on U.S. Route 224 in Canfield. "Anytime I can open a new one in the Valley, I love it." The Canfield restaurant opened last week, but a grand opening ceremony was held Wednesday. Covelli said he liked the site in Westford Lifestyle Community because homes, offices, shops and a golf course are included in the development. "It's the future," he said. Still, he's on the lookout for other locations in the area that are growing. His Warren-based company, Covelli Enterprises, operates Panera Warren and Hermitage, Pa. restaurants in Austintown, Boardman, and that's just for starters. Covelli Enterprises is the largest franchisee for Panera, which has headquarters in St. Louis. The number of Covelli-owned Panera restaurants is about to jump to 135 because the company is in the process of acquiring the franchise for the West Palm Beach, Fla., area. That area has 16 Panera restaurants, but Covelli said he thinks he can increase that to 40 or 50. Covelli already has restaurants in the Orlando and Tampa areas. He also has franchises in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Covelli said he soon will have 140 restaurants because a location in the Cleveland area will open soon and others are planned for Pittsburgh and West Virginia. Ken Devine, Panera's director of franchise operations, said Covelli is successful because he invests in his restaurants and finds good locations. Also, Covelli is committed to provide consistent quality, said Devine, pointing to the new restaurant's bakery, "You'll never see the bakery look any different than what it does right now," Devine said. Panera isn't the only concept that Covelli is expanding. He opened his first O'Charley's restaurant last year in Niles and followed that up with one in Erie, Pa., two weeks ago. His third O'Charley's will open in Boardman at the end of January. The restaurant is under construction on South Avenue across from Wal-Mart. O'Charley's offers sit-down service with a menu that includes steak and seafood. The Tennessee-based company has about 300 restaurants around the country. Covelli said he will start construction of an O'Charley's in Orlando soon and also is looking at three potential sites in the Cleveland area.

Covelli, who started with Panera after selling 23 area McDonald's restaurants in 1998 and 1999, said the expansion of his company's Warren headquarters was completed two months ago. Employment there has increased from 40 to 60.

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