

Chamberlin sold!

Local firm clinches retirement community deal

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Members of the Fort Monroe community will soon witness one of the most ambitious renovation and construction projects in the Chamberlin Hotel's 76-year history.

Local real estate management firm Drucker & Falk, LLC, formed an investment group named OPC Hampton, and on Tuesday that entity closed on the purchase of the Chamberlin, thus ending the facility's 17-month stay in bankruptcy court. Combined with a long-term land lease agreement with the military, which was signed Monday, the deal means the investment firm can move forward with its plan to convert the hotel complex into a retirement community with emphasis on retired military.

At a cost of roughly \$49 million, OPC is planning to create 128 luxury apartments in the hotel and another 74 units in a separate apartment tower/parking garage complex to be built on a currently vacant parking lot next to the facility, according to Robert Lippard, Drucker & Falk's Director of Senior Living. The apartment tower will be six stories high, sitting atop a three-level garage.

"We're also going to restore the exterior of the hotel, and many of the features within, that will make it look like it did back in its heyday," Lippard said. "That part of the project is every bit as exciting as developing the new senior living community itself."

The renovation and construction work is projected to begin this coming summer, and will take about 20 months to complete, according to Lippard. Residents should begin moving in during the spring of 2007.

"While the Chamberlin Hotel has always been privately owned and operated, its location within the heart of Fort Monroe makes it an important part of our community," said Col. Perry D. Allmendinger, garrison commander, in response to the proposed project. "I think this is exciting not only from a historical preservation standpoint, but also its promise of bringing new neighbors to our installation. I view this as a sign of growth and new opportunity."

Emphasizing Fort Monroe's role in the approval process for the new 50-year ground lease, Lt. Col. Craig Simoneau, post Director of Public Works/Logistics, said operational and force protection factors were carefully considered before the okay was given for the facility.

"The plan ensures the continued viability and preservation of a significant facility located on the historic landmark of Fort Monroe," Simoneau said. The Chamberlin traces its roots back to the first hotel built on the site in 1896. A massive fire gutted the building 24 years later, and the current building was erected in 1928.

"The installation will also gain use of one level of the new parking garage, which will definitely benefit Monroe employees who work in that area," Simoneau added. "Furthermore, the emphasis on retired military living in the renovated facility fits our force protection efforts better than a hotel operation where a wider range of guests would be entering the installation."

The State Division of Historic Resources and the Norfolk District of the Army Corps of Engineers also participated in the land-lease agreement. The Army Corps' Chief of Real Estate Dillard Horton said the new lease "results in a win-win situation for the U.S. Army, the developer and the Hampton Roads community."

Offering additional details about the planned retirement community, Lippard said the new apartments would range in size from 800 to 1,300 square feet, with monthly rent estimated between \$3,300 and \$4,500, respectively. Rental fees would include all utilities and a variety of amenities such as fine dining, linen service and public transportation.

A 34-unit assisted living facility is planned for the first two levels of the new apartment tower. Sentara Healthcare will manage the facility, and, over time, will provide enough staff through its home healthcare organization to allow residents to "age in place" in their apartment homes — a much-desired option among today's retirement communities, Lippard explained.

"One of the reasons we're convinced this community will be a success is the opportunity for residents to age in place with the option of moving into an assisted living facility on the same site," Lippard said. "One of the hardest decisions a senior citizen ever has to make is moving away from their friends and family to enter an assisted living facility. We're offering it in the same complex."

While the assisted living facility will be open to the general public, Lippard noted, residents of the retirement community will have "first right of access" when they need it.

Another strong prospect for success of the project is found in the Chamberlin's commanding view of the Chesapeake Bay, according to Lippard. Citing data gathered during a yearlong consumer study that began in the summer of 2003, he said the project's attractiveness was "strongly rooted" in the location — not only on the bay, but also within the Tidewater area. Focus groups were also enticed by the idea of residing in a historic landmark. Cost and services provided were also among the considerations.

Future residents will definitely be getting their money's worth when it comes to the Chamberlin's 1920's-era charm. The main lobby on the second floor of the complex will be restored to its original state, Lippard said, with the only significant new addition being an improved kitchen facility to provide upscale meals in the existing dining room. Other areas off the lobby will be used for group activities and meeting spaces. A coffee/baked goods kiosk, convenience store and a business/technology center are also planned lobby attractions for residents.

The upper floors of the Chamberlin will also maintain their ancestral glitz, Lippard noted. Decorative hotel doors and sills are to remain intact. "When a resident steps out of that elevator, he will step back in time," he added. "Our goal is to maintain that original charm that many of our potential residents experienced years ago."

Perhaps the crowning glory of the Chamberlin project will be the planned restoration of two observation towers that were part of the original structure until they were lopped off during World War II as a security measure.

"The plan is to provide access to spaces immediately beneath the towers from a few of the apartments on the eighth floor," Lippard said. "That view is going to be spectacular."

Lippard noted that Drucker & Falk's interest in restoring the building is driven by far more than simply the financial rewards. The company — established in the 1930s — literally grew up during the same era as the Chamberlin.

“There’s a tangible sense of nostalgia among the principals of Drucker & Falk,” Lippard said. “Wendy Drucker (executive vice president) learned how to swim in the Chamberlin’s indoor pool, and remembers eating Sunday brunch in the dining room. This is about family and preserving an important part of what the Hampton Roads community is all about.”

Further updates about the Chamberlin project will appear in future editions of the Casemate.

An architectural sketch provided by local firm Drucker & Falk, LLC, shows the proposed design of the new Chamberlin Retirement Community complex. The sketch does not show the two towers atop the hotel building that the firm plans to restore as part of its efforts to preserve the building’s historical accuracy.

An July 1938 photo shows what the Chamberlin looked like back in its heyday. The recently approved OPC Hampton renovation and construction project promises to restore many facets of the building to near-original condition while converting the complex into a retirement community with emphasis on retired military.