

Bellevue Biltmore Future Remains Undetermined

By Concetta DeLuco

It's been almost a month since the historic Bellevue Biltmore hotel and its assets were purchased by the Miami based investment group, KAWA Capital Management, for a little more than \$8 million and the answer to the question "What will become of the historic Bellevue Biltmore?" still remains unclear.

In the place of answers, instead, comes rumor after rumor about the potential fate of the "White Queen of the Gulf," with the most rampant being the threat that the hotel will be demolished, instead of saved and restored to its original glory.

This is a reoccurring issue that Belleair residents and preservationists have been struggling with for years, most recently September 2005 when a deal to purchase and preserve the property fell through with the De Bartolo Development Group.

Desperate campaigns to "Save the Biltmore" ensued until Legg Mason Real Estate Investors, a Baltimore based management firm, stepped in and took over the property in 2007 with the same intention to return the hotel and its assets to its former state.

Fast forward to today and up until recently, the Biltmore was again without an owner. A combination of the recession and costly repairs put the property into foreclosure until it was purchased at the end of December 2010 by KAWA Management. The problem? Most residents do not know the intention of the new group.

A spokesperson for the new investment group said that while the Ades brothers main concern lies in 136-acre golf course and Cabana

Biltmore, See B5

Biltmore, From A1

Club on Sand Key and "have no interest in being hotel owners, they do have interest in preserving the hotel." He says the group went as far as speaking with the National Register of Historic Places, of which the Biltmore hotel was adopted in 1979, and letting them know the group intends to seek preservation.

There are a number of ways that this can be done, he says, which mainly involves finding the right investors to purchase the hotel from them. The problem comes with finding a group of investors who can afford the repairs. In 2007, Legg Mason put together costly estimates for renovations well over \$100,000,000 that were approved by the commission but became "no longer practical once the real estate market crashed," the spokesperson said.

In mid-November, prior to the KAWA group purchasing the properties, the Senior Care Group, a Tampa based non-profit, expressed interest in turning the Biltmore hotel into a healthcare center and multi-use facility for seniors. The transformation would involve preserving most of the hotel's historic interior and exterior features minus the pagoda entrance, pool and some restructuring of the wings to make them more suitable for a wellness center, said Kevin McGuinness, president of the company's real estate development arm, Senior Care International.

Since the purchase of the Biltmore properties by the KAWA group, Senior Care has said they are continuing to express interest in purchasing the hotel from the new owners, have met with three architects and are in the preliminary design stages, putting together estimates and have already been in contact with the KAWA group about making a potential offer.

"Everyone has to realize it (the Biltmore) will never be a 400 room hotel as it is now...there is no economic plan that would allow it to support the debt as it stands," said McGuinness.

Right now, he says the biggest problem is trying to convert the hotel into the wellness facility while still preserving most of it.

"The numbers have come back extremely high," he said. "Restorations are more expensive than building a new institution which has sent us back to the drawing board."

When asked about whether KAWA Capital Management is considering selling the hotel to Senior Care, the group's spokesperson denies having had any dealings with the senior group, as well as any future plans to turn the Belleview Biltmore into a health care facility.

Staunch advocates for the preservation of the hotel come in the form of the town of Belleair commissioners, as well as Belleair residents and protestors. Mayor Gary Katica completely denounces the idea that the Senior Care can turn the hotel into a health facility stating that the Biltmore hotel "is zoned for a hotel." This means that while ideally he would like the Biltmore restored, there is also the option of building a new hotel in its place, but "it can't be anything other than a hotel."

"The Senior Care Group doesn't know what they are talking about," said Rae Claire Johnson of the "Friends of the Belleview Biltmore" club and frontrunner for the hotel's preservation. "Mayor Katica doesn't know what he's talking about."

Johnson says the Belleview Biltmore can only be preserved and restored—no senior care facility, no new hotel. She quotes that the historic building is protected by the town of Belleair's comprehensive plan, which she says clearly identifies the role and future of the hotel, a historic preservation ordinance put in place in 2005 in the attempt to avoid any future confusion such as this, and the town charter.

Getting approval to change any one of these documents would be extremely complicated; she says and would involve "the approval of the citizens, the commission, county, and state."

Senior Care begs to differ, saying getting approval for zoning "will not be that difficult because there is not going to be a great deal of a zoning change."

And despite what the commission and most citizens may want to see happen to the hotel, Micah Maxwell, the Belleair Town Manager, said it is possible that the Biltmore Hotel will not be restored to its former grandeur. Unlike what Johnson believes, he says there is nothing in the ordinance, charter or comprehensive plan that says only the Belleview Biltmore can exist on that property, nor is the final decision up to the citizens.

"The commission will hear the people, but has the right to allow a demolition permit if one came through. There is nothing that says that can't happen." He agrees that getting the ordinance, town charter and comprehensive plan overridden is a very complicated process, but it can be done and at the end of the day, "it all comes down to what the owners decide to do."

On the bright side, Johnson says she has been in "frequent dialogue" with the KAWA group and she trusts their intentions to find the right buyers and "do the right thing," putting to rest some of uncertainty of what the new owners are planning to do. She says the most important thing investors need to realize is that while there are some costly repairs like the soffits or the roof, which has accrued an outstanding lien of \$100,000 imposed by the town of Belleair, the interior features that have historical significance like the hard wood floors, wooden frame or Tiffany stained glass windows are all in good shape.
