

Inside look at Talisman

(by Don Crosby)

The opening date for the refurbished former Talisman resort is still more than six months away.

But while most of the renovation work has yet to be done, the driving force behind the plan (and part-owner) Brian Ellis remains confident that the July 1 deadline can be achieved.

"That's the timeline I've given them, that's what I want," said Ellis during a recent tour of the resort, during which he outlined his vision to transform what is already an historic icon of the Beaver Valley into an upscale hotel and spa - an adult getaway for a new generation of fun-seekers.

FROM FAMILY FUN TO ADULT SPA

Talisman was a family-friendly ski resort and best-known as one of the first hills in Ontario to actually welcome snowboarders in the early 1990s. Thousands of school kids were bused to Talisman to learn how to ski.

But those days are gone. Skiing doesn't feature in the future of the resort, said Ellis.

Instead its ballroom and meeting rooms are being re-fashioned as part of a four-seasons destination for intimate family gatherings, weddings and conferences.

The former ski and snow boarding rental facilities in the Day Lodge will be turned into part of the spa with treatment rooms.

During a 90-minute tour of the building with Ellis and his wife Therese, it became evident that what many had described as derelict buildings are in quite good shape and retain much of their original lustre and charm.

Ellis estimates the grounds and three original buildings, some of which date back to 1963, along with the nine-hole golf course, convention facilities and the day lodge will be ready for occupancy by Canada Day 2015.

The Scandinavian style spas and hot tubs, complete with a waterfall and such related amenities as massage and yoga services will be ready by next fall, he said.

ADDRESSING DAMAGE

Since Ellis and his partners took ownership of the facility on May 23 this year, much of the work has focused on removing the mould and cleaning up water damage on the lower level of one of the buildings. To his surprise, the water and mould damage were far less than had been predicted.

There was also slight damage done by trespassers who vandalized parts of the buildings.

Efforts to date have focused on strengthening parts of the foundations of #1 building (Mountainside).

Damp-proofing measures have been installed on the outside along with a new drainage system, to prevent any further flooding and eliminate the possibility of future water damage.

"We'll never have the issue that they used to have here from time to time with flooding. It's costing us a fortune but we want to save the building," said Ellis, who explained an old adage in the development industry that says, "never spend just enough money to fail; you've got to keep going." He's confident that renovations and upgrades will remain within the original \$5 to \$7 million estimate.

The main reception area in the Number One building will remain but with new flooring and a change of décor.

When the resort closed abruptly in the spring of 2011 the buildings were abandoned with tables set for service, the bedrooms ready for guests with beds made up and towels hanging in the bathrooms.

"Any of the good stuff we've sent away to get cleaned and sanitized, he said. "The bedspreads we threw out - they were a little dated anyway, quite frankly."

Plans also call for increasing the insulation values in Building #1 (Mountainside) along with all new windows and doors, and railings. The exterior of that building will be finished with stucco.

"We've made some decisions along the way that cost us a little more than what we had originally planned, like the stuccoing," Ellis said. "We weren't going to do that, but then we realized we had to bump up the insulation in here and the wood was getting pretty frayed on Building #1, and so we said 'let's bite the bullet.'"

Ellis said there are plenty of challenges being uncovered some that weren't apparent at the time of purchase. "We knew what we were buying and we knew there were going to be issues, what those issues were we weren't 100% sure; we had a pretty good idea, so nothing has really shocked us very much."

BUILDING #1

At every opportunity, Ellis points out the striking view that is available all around the buildings, but especially the view to the east with the escarpment and Mount Baldy in the background, the valley floor below in the near distance and what will eventually be a refurbished, executive golf course and tennis courts as well as the new spa facilities in the foreground.

Windows on the east side of the second floor in Building #1 will be replaced with French doors and a large arched entry feature, together with a Juliet balcony.

Ellis said the conference rooms will change very little, with new flooring, curtains and windows while maintaining the original woodwork. The wine room complete with dozens of shelves and wine tasting area will be restored, as well as all of the fireplaces in the resort.

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The former children's activity room will also be saved with some minor repairs. "It was one of their busiest conference rooms, they probably had more weddings than the ball room upstairs," he said.

Plans call for a court area at the back of Building #1 with a water feature, landscaping and an open air dining area. The former snow-making towers will be removed from the ski hills. "It will be a really nice dining area in the summer time with a view of the ski hill." The fireside lounge will remain for use by hotel guests.

The bedrooms on the top floor of Building #1 will be

redone with new flooring trim. The bath tubs will be placed with solid glass showers, new toilets and vanities.

LOCAL JOBS

All of the services will be open to the public with a special welcome to local residents.

The whole resort will be wheel chair accessible along with some rooms and suites.

More than half of the 40 or so workers currently employed are from the area and there will be more as the renovations take off. The team who helped with the mould removal has come to help out with more of the renovations.

"They want to work full-time when we're done," said Ellis, who expects more than 130 will be employed once the resort is in full operation.

Ralph Walsh, owner of Grey Northern Powerline Inc., has fond memories of Talisman. He grew up working at the resort from the time he was a teen - first as a lift operator and then a groomer for a few years.

He is relieved to see the plans to restore the resort property once again make it the hub of the Beaver Valley. "The whole community is worried about what they were going to see here," said Walsh, who is confident that Ellis can restore the resort again.

"If I wasn't confident I wouldn't be here... You can see the commitment in (his) eyes when he drives onto the property and the excitement of it all. I'm hoping for great things from him," said Walsh.

There are stacks of chairs, bathtubs, desks and other furnishings in all of the buildings, which will be sold at a giant garage sale sometime in the new year.

BUILDING #2

A set of special rooms in Building # 2, which were called the Hamer suite after the former owner Jake Hamer, has its own built-in kitchen and two bedrooms, bathrooms and fire place. It was trashed by the trespassers, but will be restored for use as an executive or honey moon suite.

The former disco in the basement which later became a sports lounge and a games room will be turned into a conference room used for team building activities.

Building #2 is the main hotel with over 60 rooms. It was the building that suffered the most damage from the vandals, with ceilings pulled down and some stripping of copper water pipes.

However, the suites on the third floor were the last to be built in 2002 and will remain largely unchanged except for new furniture. "Everything in these rooms is in good shape.

It just needs some minor repairs and minor paint," said Ellis, who explained that this building was constructed over time one floor at a time.

"We're going to call this the Talisman floor, because it's going to have the old Talisman feel and look," he said.

For now, the exterior of Building # 2 will be painted with minor upgrades to the wooden exterior.

BUILDING #3

The Day Lodge or Building #3 is where the winter sports

businesses operated with rentals of skis and snow boarding equipment and locker rooms. The parking lot in front of the Day Lodge will become the spa and pools complex complete with 30 foot waterfall and grotto.

"It will have a very Nordic feeling," Ellis said.

There are thoughts of turning the former golf shop into a boutique. Upstairs in the Day Lodge, the main cafeteria will become the treatment rooms and hot yoga studio.

There will be a lounging area, where people can wait for their treatment in one of 20 treatment rooms. .

The former bar in that building will be converted to a restaurant.

"This will be more of a high end restaurant, with afternoon tea, as well as the bar, and expanding the deck which will be overlooking the spa and pools," Ellis explained.

Once renovations are completed, the resort will have two large indoor restaurants and one outdoor restaurant as well as food venues by the pool.

FUTURE PLANS

Ellis said there are plans already to hold a fund raising event for the Canadian Cancer Society next September with women cancer survivors negotiating an obstacle course.

"We're expecting at least 1,000 people for that; we're pretty excited to be

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participating in that. We want to make sure that we do as much of that kind thing as we can," he said.

Three winners of a contest to choose a new name for the re-visioned resort were announced on Saturday. (They are included in Lynn Silverton's Gray Highlander column).

Ellis said the names submitted in the contest won't

necessarily be used as the final selection.

"They are part of what we're looking at right now," he said. But he did reveal that word "Springs," which was par of each of the top-three choices, will be a part of the new name.

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TOUR OF TALISMAN - Brian Ellis and his wife Therese pose outside Mountainside, now called Building #1. (photo by Don Crosby)