

Byblos rebranding Grand Island Holiday Inn

Holiday Inn Resort & Conference Center, bought at auction by a Mideast company, is becoming Byblos Niagara Resort & Spa.

By Jonathan D. Epstein / News Business Reporter /

The Holiday Inn Resort & Conference Center on Grand Island has a new name and brand, following its \$4 million purchase at auction by a Middle Eastern hospitality firm: Byblos Niagara Resort & Spa.

Byblos Hospitality Group of Dubai teamed up with two local partners – downtown Buffalo developer Roger Trettel and Buffalo General Medical Center surgeon Dr. Fadi Dagher – to buy the longtime hotel at 100 Whitehaven Road in January. Byblos, the majority owner, now is investing significant money into renovating the 263-room facility, which will be run by Byblos Hospitality Management.

The company, based in the United Arab Emirates, wants to upgrade the 40-year-old hotel with new features to make it more of a destination resort, said Fadi Touma, a Byblos representative who is handling the ownership and management transition on-site.

The hotel already has 26,000 square feet of meeting space, two swimming pools, a fitness center and a banquet center, but hasn't been upgraded in years. Major planned improvements

include development of an American bar or pub alongside the existing restaurant, a spa, and a modernized fitness center.

The hotel, located on 12 acres along the shore of the Niagara River, is across the street from River Oaks Golf Course, and Touma said officials hope to partner with the owner so hotel guests can utilize the course and its facilities.

Several phases of renovations are being planned over the next two years, with work to begin once contractors are selected and town approvals are in place, he said. "It will be done in different stages. It's not going to happen all overnight," he said, adding that the hotel will remain open throughout.

The hotel was sold by Royal Bank of Canada, which had foreclosed on it more than two years ago because it was owed more than \$7.9 million on a mortgage by the previous owner, American Hospitality Group LLC. The bank tried unsuccessfully to auction it once in February 2011 but then invested more than \$950,000 to stabilize and reposition it before the second auction, which attracted a lot of attention.

Touma said the company was attracted to the property by "the geographic location, the potential that the hotel has, being on the river," saying it's "like a small island on an island."

"Our goal is to make it a destination, not just a hotel," he said. "We are very thrilled about taking this property over and trying to make it a destination where everyone can enjoy the different activities that we will have at the hotel."

The purchase and renovation on Grand Island marks the company's first expansion into the U.S. market. Byblos was founded in 2005 by CEO Jean Samman after seeing how the hospitality and tourism industry had grown and flourished in Dubai. The company owns six hotels, one hotel residence, a chain of La Gaufrette coffee shops and the Bazerkan chain of

Lebanese restaurants. Except for Byblos Niagara, all are in Dubai.

“We are thrilled to add this exceptional property to our hotel portfolio and improve our services and offerings,” Samman said.

Byblos wants to expand further in the United States, through acquiring or developing additional properties, although “there is nothing in the pipeline” and the company does not have any specific geography or destination in mind, Touma said.

“If an opportunity arises that he feels is a good opportunity for the company, I am sure he will jump on it,” he said, referring to Samman. “The intention is to grow in the U.S. market, and we’ll see how that works.”