

Grand Island Radisson, take 2: New buyers would revive redevelopment plans

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After more than three years in limbo after closing in late 2022 as a hotel, the giant former Radisson hotel property on Grand Island may finally get a new owner with a vision to bring it back to life. But not as a hotel.

An unidentified group of Israeli investors has reportedly agreed to buy the seven-story former Radisson Hotel Niagara Falls-Grand Island at 100 Whitehaven Road from the local redevelopment team that has owned it since December 2022.

The agreement, whose price has not been disclosed, is still subject to due diligence through Nov. 21, and the buyers plan to come back to town Nov. 22, said Vienna Laurendi, a broker at Howard Hanna Real Estate Services, who represents them. So the deal is not yet final or certain, and Laurendi declined to identify the buyers or elaborate on their intentions.

However, Grand Island Council Member Jose Garcia says he met with the purported buyers, who own other property on the north side of the island. He said they came to town to discuss developing that property and formulating a concept plan when Laurendi pitched them on the hotel and invited him to meet with them. He also would not identify them.

But he described them as "proven developers" and "very, very kind gentlemen," who also have other projects in the works around the country. And he said they had previously been interested in the Radisson a couple of years ago, "but that didn't come to fruition."

This time, though, their offer was accepted by the current ownership group, led by architect Michael Conroe of Orchard Park-based Elev8 Architecture and Justin Earl of JB Earl Co. in Utah, whose ambitious plans to redevelop the hotel into an apartment complex with some short-term rentals have been stymied and stalled for more than two years because of finances, even after winning a critical rezoning change to a "planned development district" at the very start.

Now the potential new owners, if they proceed, plan to pursue a similar concept, possibly even working within the existing PDD and site plan. "They are over the moon ready to start work on that project," Garcia said.

Meanwhile, Patrick Kaler, CEO of Visit Buffalo, said he is "just watching to see what happens with that property," given the shortage of hotel rooms in the region, which has lost over 1,100 rooms in recent years. "It's always had a great place in our overall tourism economy so I would love to see a hotel back on Grand Island for what it means to the region," he said. "We've been on a roller coaster with all of our hotel properties."

According to Garcia, the buyers want to convert the hotel's 263 rooms into 150 to 200 luxury apartments, by combining hotel rooms to create larger apartments, either on a single floor or perhaps even multilevel in some cases. There would also be a smaller subset of short-term rental units that could be used for longer-term hotel-style stays or by "snowbirds" who still want a place in Western New York when they are not in warmer climates.

They would also include some mixed-use space on the lower floor, with a restaurant and some conference or event space, "something that we are lacking on Grand Island," the councilman said. "I am thrilled at this prospect," Garcia said. "That's what they're interested in developing, and that's what our community is interested in having."

Those general elements are already incorporated in the approved PDD, although the new developers would have to go through site plan approval. Specific details still have to be finalized, and the uses could fluctuate "back and forth a little bit" as the plans are fine-tuned.

But the primary use would be luxury apartments. And while it would not be classified as senior housing or age-restricted, Garcia said he envisioned it meeting a critical need for that on the island, based on conversations he has had with constituents. "One of the biggest challenges on Grand Island is we don't have a ton of senior housing or housing that seniors can go to while remaining on Grand Island," he said. "These people are sitting on beautiful single-family homes all over Grand Island, and their kids are gone, and they'd like to do something

else or move, but they don't want to leave their hometown. This is an opportunity for people to remain engaged on Grand Island."

And it would accomplish a goal of reusing a large vacant building that has languished on prime waterfront land, almost abandoned after decades of activity. That's been a source of frustration and irritation for many neighbors and other residents.

"As a resident of Grand Island, one of the things that's been stuck in my craw is that this beautiful piece of property is abandoned," Garcia said. "The owners are doing what they can to try to keep it safe, but it was something that we used as a makeshift community center. They would have events and fireworks. Class reunions would be held here. It's something we're lacking, and I'd like to see it come back."

He said the potential buyers were open to that. "They seemed very willing to be an active part of the community and be engaged in the community, versus keeping it private," Garcia added.

He said he hopes that the buyers will be able to close on the purchase in early 2026 "and get started."

The acquisition and redevelopment would be a major turnaround for the 53-year-old hotel, which was one of the region's largest, but struggled because of its awkward location between Buffalo and Niagara Falls but not in either city. Previously a Holiday Inn Resort & Conference Center, it was acquired at auction in 2013 by Byblos Hospitality Group of Dubai – along with Buffalo investors Roger Trettel and Dr. Fadi Dagher – for \$4 million, after a foreclosure.

But the new owners failed to make much headway with their redubbed Byblos Niagara Resort & Spa, putting it back on the market in 2014 and selling it a year later for \$6.25 million to Sam Chang's McSam Hotel Group of Long Island, which rebranded it to Radisson in 2016. "I was disappointed with Byblos. They had said a lot they were going to do, but it didn't work out," Garcia said.

Conroe and Earl bought it in December 2022 for \$6.15 million, after winning municipal approvals the previous month for a \$25 million to \$30 million

redevelopment. They initially planned to convert the hotel rooms to 132 market-rate apartments, but later decided to keep 80 hotel rooms in the mix, with the long-term rentals in the six-story wing and the short-term, monthly or even nightly hotel rooms in the four-story center. The developers also had agreed to construct a publicly accessible waterfront park with picnic benches, a pedestrian trail and kayak launch.

But rising interest rates and soaring costs made their project too expensive, so they worked to bring in new investors and eventually put the 10.75-acre site up for sale, first for \$10.25 million but eventually for \$6.9 million after cutting the price three times. Their group now also includes Joseph Mannarino of Buffalo Construction Consultants and Joseph Carubba, former owner of Carubba Collision. The hotel has been closed since 2022.

"I have high hopes," Garcia said. "I was disappointed with this existing development group that they didn't develop it, but I'm glad they were able to market it and hopefully we'll get what we need."

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