Gulfport lands Holiday Inn Resort for Centennial Plaza

A Holiday Inn Resort will anchor an initial $40.5 million development planned at Centennial Plaza. That announcement was accompanied Tuesday afternoon at City Hall by the unfurling of a banner and broad smiles from city leaders who have waited years for this day.

Louisiana developer Stewart Juneau said federal and state tax credits available for historic properties are the only reason his company, le Triomphe Property Group, can sink so much money into the project.

The federal government spent $39 million renovating the exteriors of 10 buildings on the oak-shaded property, the former home of a veterans medical center, before deeding it to the city after Hurricane Katrina. The 57-acre property was originally developed in 1917 for Mississippi’s centennial celebration, but World Ward I derailed those plans.

“Without (tax credits),” Juneau said, “these buildings would not get developed and they would crumble into the ground.” Instead, Gulfport will join 18 other localities in this country, including Fort Walton Beach, Fla., with a Holiday Inn Resort.

“Now that we’ve got our anchor lined up, it should be the catalyst to develop the rest of the property,” Mayor Billy Hewes said.

Two existing buildings on the western side of the property will have hotel rooms. Le Triomphe will construct a central building for check-in, offices and amenities. A pool with a lazy river also is planned. The hotel development is expected to cost about $30 million.

Juneau expects the Holiday Inn Resort to be open by the beginning of 2016.

Le Triomphe will invest an additional $10 million for other improvements. Interior renovations are planned to an old chapel at the property’s entrance, Juneau said. It will be available for public events. Developers are trying to secure restaurants as tenants for a two-story building at the entrance, and tenants for retail and office space for another building.

Juneau said miles of trails and sidewalks, plus roads and other infrastructure, also are planned, along with an open-air market and stage on the central parade grounds. Monthly marquee events will be held on the property. Events already lined up include Cruisin’ The Coast, Barbecue Under the Oaks and the CASA Halloween party.

A future development phase, estimated at $80 million, would include a beach boardwalk and pier, complete with vending stalls, a Ferris wheel and other attractions. Juneau said le Triomphe plans to talk soon with state leaders about using development incentives the state offers for tourism projects.

“The GRC is extremely pleased not only with the vision for Centennial Plaza development, but also with the appreciation the developers have for the historical significance and importance of the property and its preservation for generations to come.” GRC Chairwoman Carole Lynn Meadows said.

Hewes said the city will enhance Centennial Plaza’s appeal by cleaning out Coffee Creek, which runs along the property’s western edge to the Clower-Thornton Nature Trail.

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