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New hotel to be conference center

By Diane Urbani de la Paz
 Peninsula Daily News

SEQUIM -- To this town's palette as a retirement mecca-lavender capital-elk-stomping ground, Bret Wirta wants to add convention destination.

Wirta, the Seattle developer who opened the Quality Inn & Suites on Sequim's west side back in 2006, is determined to build another hotel to serve as a local stimulus package.

It's the three-story Holiday Inn Express at 1441 E. Washington St., scheduled to open in November, with 77 guest rooms and suites, conference space for 250, a swimming pool and fitness center and two rooftop gardens.

On a tour of the sprawling construction site Tuesday afternoon, Wirta said he wants the hotel to be "the tide that raises all boats" in Sequim: first by putting contractors to work and then by bringing business people to meetings here.

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Though he hired Wright Development of Portland as his general contractor, Wirta emphasized that the subcontractors are local companies. Primo Construction prepared the site and TJC Contracting of Sequim was chosen as the framer.

Conference rooms

Wirta added that he had to obtain waivers from Holiday Inn in order to build an Express with large conference rooms -- an exception for the chain -- plus a Black Bear Diner next door.

"This gives us a product no one else has," he said. "We will have a feet-on-the-street sales force in Seattle, Bellevue and Redmond . . . we think we'll be able to drive people to the Peninsula for business" and, he hopes, for weekends of play afterward.

The only way to justify a large hotel like this, Wirta said, is to swell the number of people discovering Sequim as both a convention and a vacation destination.

"If this were a further exercise in dividing up the pie" of tourist-lodging dollars, "then we wouldn't be interested."

Wirta's hotel will provide information about local shopping, farms, cycling on the Olympic Discovery Trail and other activities, while offering a "free" breakfast, and lunch and dinner options at the Black Bear.

Contrary to previous plans, the diner will debut a few months after the hotel's Nov. 20 estimated opening date.

That's because, Wirta said, financing the two projects has been "a huge issue" as the recession deepened.

Yet he's confident his hotel, which will rise to a height of 45-feet-9-inches, will provide an impressive greeting to travelers headed for Sequim.

A different box

"We promised the city it wouldn't be the same box you see everywhere else," Wirta said.

The roof gardens will give the light-brown edifice a green top visible from U.S. Highway 101, and guests will be able to take the stairs or elevator up to commune with the plants.

"This will be spectacular with the up-lighting," Wirta said.

And after the inn is "up and running," he'll look into solar heating.

An Automobile Club of America office will be located inside the hotel, said Damian Humphreys, marketing director for both the Holiday Inn Express and the Quality Inn.

As for room rates at the new hotel, Humphreys said they will be a little higher than the Quality's \$149-per-night summer prices.

Wirta, meantime, believes his hotel and convention facilities will awaken business people to the beauties of the North Olympic Peninsula and that they will be inclined to stay a few extra days, even bring their families back for more.

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The Holiday Inn Express construction site greets travelers heading westbound into Sequim on U.S. Highway 101. The 77-room hotel and conference center is expected to open in November, with roof gardens, a swimming pool and convention facilities for up to 250.

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"We feel confident," he said, "that there will be more people traveling to the area that have never traveled here before."

So far this summer, Sequim has held its own, despite recessionary gloom.

At the Visitor Information Center, 1192 E. Washington St. just up the road from the Holiday Inn site, 2,748 people signed in during June, and that's up 156 from the same month last year, according to Sequim-Dungeness Valley Chamber of Commerce director Vickie Maples. Of the June 2009 documented visitors, 929 were from Washington state, 231 were from California and 127 came from Canada.

Next month may be a stronger indicator of Sequim's vacation allure, since July is the Visitor Information Center's busiest month, thanks to the Lavender Festival. Last year 6,062 people signed in during July, Maples said.



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