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Proposed downtown high-rise hotel draws little opposition

By Paul Swider, Times Staff Writer
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The 22-story hotel would rise on the site of the 1912 Henry-Bryan house and 1910 Chateau France restaurant building. The developer has had a positive response from the Downtown Neighborhood Association.



[Liberty Group]

ST. PETERSBURG

Neighbors are apparently receptive to a new 22-story hotel proposed for downtown if the developer can somehow preserve the old buildings sitting on the site now.

Liberty Group has applied with the city for site approval to build a 252-room, 260-foot-tall hotel on land just off Beach Drive along Fourth Avenue NE. The \$54-million building and its restaurants, conference center, spa and other amenities would displace two historic structures: the 1912 Henry-Bryan house and the 1910 Bay Gables house, now operating as Chateau France restaurant.

"The reaction has been real positive," said Tim Clemmons, an architect and a member of the Downtown Neighborhood Association, which met with Liberty in April to discuss the project. "The controversy is not the design; it's the disposition of the historic buildings."

Liberty has suggested moving the Henry-Bryan house to Pioneer Village near Boyd Hill Nature Preserve on the south side of the city. There is some question about whether the Bay Gables house can be moved at all, said Punit R. Shah, the president of Liberty Group, but he is exploring the possibilities.

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"It's our goal to preserve the history of St. Petersburg," Shah said.

But carting away a historic structure far from its original site removes some of its worth, said Will Michaels, president of St. Petersburg Preservation Inc.

"Preserving these houses is important for the historic value, but also for the economic viability of the city," Michaels said. "If you move it out of downtown to a historic-house petting zoo, you lose the historic charm that people come here for."

Michaels said the homes' protected status, bestowed in 1994, requires the developer to provide compelling reasons to move or demolish them. He said that in the case of Bay Gables, if it can't be moved, perhaps the developer should work around it.

"If you can't relocate it," he said, "is there a way to build the hotel so the house can remain in place?"

Shah said his consultants are still evaluating Bay Gables and that he suggests moving the homes only as one option. He said he's open to donating the homes if someone else can provide a more appropriate downtown location.

"We're willing to discuss this with the neighborhood associations," he said. "Perhaps someone would find a use for these and we could consider relocating them locally."

If the parties can resolve the issues over the old homes, the rest of the project seems to be warmly received. With much discussion of new downtown hotels, a proposed four- or five-star accommodation would be welcomed because it would be in the downtown core, unlike a proposal defeated last year to put a hotel along Fifth Avenue N.

The new project, named Liberty Bayfront, would put about 200,000 square feet of mixed uses on a site of just over an acre. There would be almost 300 parking spaces in a four-level garage before the hotel tower would rise the remaining 18 stories. Shah said he is still in negotiation over which flag the hotel would carry, but plans are for an upscale affiliation.

"Not (just) any hotel will be successful downtown," Shah said. "It will take the right type of hotel with the right type of brand."

This project would be the first hotel in Pinellas County for Liberty, though the Tierra Verde-based company has built some condos here and has a Holiday Inn Express in Tampa. Liberty has several other hotels in Ohio, Georgia, Michigan, Indiana, Tennessee and even England. Shah said he has been searching for the right site close to home but has taken time to find it.

Partnering on the deal would be Dan Harvey, who owns the land. Last year, during the acrimonious debates over Tampa-based Fuel Group's proposed hotel on Fifth Avenue, Harvey offered his land as a compromise when neighbors said the Fuel project was too close to a residential area.

Shah said the Fuel Group controversy did not play into his decision to develop this project.

Liberty's process so far has been far more pleasant than the Fuel deal, the defeat of which is now the subject of a lawsuit against the city. Still, Michaels said the issue of historic homes won't go away.

"We're not opposed to development in the downtown area," he said. "It's vital to the economic health of the city. But it needs to be done in a balanced way."

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