

Trendy new hotel coming to Mount Laurel

By DANIELLE CAMILLI
phillyBurbs.com

MOUNT LAUREL — One of the newest and, arguably, trendiest brands in the hotel industry will anchor a planned upscale retail complex at the corner of Route 73 and Fellowship Road.

Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. announced this month that it has signed a deal with Grande Properties LLC of Philadelphia to build a 150-room hotel — with the brand name aloft — on the 11-acre site where the closed Laurel Inn and the budget Super 8 motel now stand.

The experience of the high-tech hotel is already generating a lot of buzz in the industry and in cyberspace. It is the first hotel to “open” in virtual reality on the Internet, giving consumers a sneak peak at the product and giving the company instant feedback on its design and concept.



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The first aloft hotels won't open until 2008 in Lexington, Mass., Tucson, Ariz., Cherry Creek, Colo., San Francisco and in Mount Laurel. Starwood predicts that by 2012, there will be 500 properties worldwide.

In addition to the hotel, the Mount Laurel redevelopment plan calls for a high-end restaurant and some 15,000 square feet of upscale retail space, said Suzanne Silver, the opening director of sales and marketing of aloft for Delco Development of Mount Laurel, the parent company of Grande Properties.

While conceptual plans have been submitted to the township, the project has not yet secured any of the necessary approvals or permits. Silver, however, said company officials are hoping to break ground on the project by the end of the summer and open the hotel by July 2008.

Township Manager Patricia Halbe said the land, which is located near the New Jersey Turnpike interchange and the ramps to Interstate 295, is key to the township's tax base.

“That's a prime location and we absolutely wanted to see it redeveloped,” she said last week. “That's one of the most valuable commercial properties in the township.”

The Laurel Inn, which closed earlier this year, was one of the township's oldest hotels and was awarded the first liquor license in Mount Laurel. Halbe said that in recent years, the inn wasn't able to draw the business traveler critical to the township's hotel market.

In recent years, the inn had become more of a concern for the township Police Department, which was getting more calls to respond there as the clientele changed.

The Super 8 is still open. Silver said it is likely both buildings on the site will be demolished to make room for the new complex, but plans have not been finalized.

"It's obviously a key intersection and any modernization would likely be deemed favorable," Mayor Mark Sanchirico said. "The facilities there are aging and refurbishing may no longer be an option...I see no down side."

The hotel may be the newest offering in Mount Laurel, but the other establishments in the township's hotel row along the Route 73 corridor have already been undergoing changes.

The Wyndham hotel underwent a \$2 million renovation a couple of years ago. The Radisson Mount Laurel on Route 73 was renovated and converted into a Marriott last year in a \$10 million project. The new hotel recently received approval for an elaborate indoor water park for its guests.

A new Westin hotel is currently under construction on the site of the former Ramada Inn on Fellowship Road. When finished in September, the new hotel will offer 194 rooms to its guests.

Judi London, president of South Jersey Tourism Corp., said the aloft is "another piece of the pie" to bringing more business and leisure travelers to the region.

"I think to have an aloft hotel in our region will take us to a first look, instead of a second look, place to stay when visiting Philadelphia," she said. "It's pretty exciting and gives a whole new face to the area."

And while the region offers all types of hotels at a wide range of prices, the aloft — a new division of the successful W hotels — will be the first niche offering as a trendy, boutique-style hotel.

"It's definitely going to attract more weekend visitors who want to experience a little something different," London said.

Silver said that experience will be high-tech and sensory with the hotel developing its own scent to evoke relaxation, and of course, brand recognition.

The Internet marketing and virtual tour of the hotel fits the style of the eventual real-world guests the hotel wants to attract. Silver said the hotel's target market are 25 to 40 year olds who appreciate and expect more high-tech amenities.

The loft-style rooms are designed with 9-foot ceilings and oversized windows, large "signature" beds, with oversized walk-in showers because, as Silver said, "Who takes a bath in a hotel room?"

The rooms also feature wireless Internet access and connections for cell phones, mp3 players, PDAs and laptops that can be linked to the large, flat panel, high-definition television.

"It's really the limited service of a W hotel," Silver said of the high-end brand, which is also a Starwood entity.

TAKE AN ONLINE TOUR

To take a virtual tour of the aloft prototype and browse your way around the first hotel to open in the 3-D computer-generated world of virtual reality, visit www.virtualaloft.com/ and www.starwoodhotels.com/aloft-hotels/index.html