

Young hotelier making big moves in Taos

By Damon Scott, editor@taosnews.com

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The hotel landscape in Taos has been in flux, mostly with properties closing. But it looks like big changes are emerging.

Jay Batra, the president of Dublin, Ohio-based Hospitality Hotel Group, recently completed a \$1.5 million renovation of the Hampton Inn by Hilton – Taos, located at 1515 Paseo del Pueblo Sur. He acquired the hotel in June 2014 after the property went into foreclosure and said revenue has already increased by about \$200,000.

The renovations included not only the property's 71 rooms, but also its pool, hot tub, fitness room and other amenities. Batra's general manager, Danyell Sena, said much of the increase in business at the Hampton Inn has been from tourists, corporate travelers and visitors to Taos Ski Valley.

But the Hampton Inn renovations are just the start for the 36-year-old hotel developer.

On 5 acres of land adjacent to the Hampton Inn, Batra has plans to build a brandnew, ground-up Holiday Inn Express with 85 rooms. He recently acquired the land through his local broker and consultant, Pavel Lukes. Lukes is the well-known owner/broker and licensed builder of Dreamcatcher Real Estate Co., along with his wife, Melody Reese-Lukes.

Batra wants to build the Holiday Inn four stories high. He said he'll seek a variance from the town of Taos, as zoning currently allows for two stories. Batra is submitting his plans to the town soon, he said.

"You have to go vertical to make the numbers work," said Lukes.

Batra is involved in more than a dozen hotel properties in New Mexico, Ohio, Wisconsin, Indiana, Arkansas, Tennessee and West Virginia.

But perhaps the transaction that will capture the town's attention is Batra's purchase of the defunct, 126-room Hotel Don Fernando de Taos.

Batra said he completed the acquisition of the Don Fernando May 31 and that it was a deal worth more than \$3 million.

"The next steps are to get fire codes and safety issues squared away and get appropriately staffed," Batra told *The Taos News* June 1.

His plans for the Don Fernando are aggressive; Batra wants to open the doors for business in about four weeks.



Pictured is a rendering of the Holiday Inn Express that Batra hopes to build next to the Hampton Inn.

Courtesy Jay Batra

“We’re talking to a franchise that we feel will be a good fit. It’s looking pretty good,” said Batra. “We need to open up as a hotel before we can bring in the franchise to demonstrate what we have.” He said he didn’t yet know if the name would change. His company is hiring now, and he said inquiries for positions can be directed to Sena at danyell.sena@hilton.com.

At its opening in 1989, the Holiday Inn Don Fernando de Taos was an \$8 million, luxury hotel. The property, located at 1005 Paseo del Pueblo Sur, which later dropped the “Holiday Inn” affiliation, promised a slew of new jobs and a boost to Taos’ image.

As J.R. Logan of *The Taos News* reported earlier this year, about two years after it opened, the hotel went bankrupt. Later, under different ownerships, it faced similar situations. It has been shuttered for months and listed for sale.

Lukes said what Batra is doing is something badly needed in Taos, describing it as a “lifeline” for the economy.

“[Batra’s] infusion of millions into our local economy is a good start at preventing Taos from becoming a business ghost town with boarded, decaying, empty buildings and storefronts that are increasingly becoming a common sight of [the] Taos landscape,” he said.

Batra was born in New Delhi, India, and spent his teenage years in California. He earned a degree in computer science from California State University, East Bay. He visited Taos many times as a youngster, he said.

“Taos has such natural beauty and has been known as a destination for a lot of folks,” Batra said. “It’s one of those [places] that’s attracted me since I was a little kid. It’s one of the most beautiful places in the U.S.”

Batra said that since he’s been involved in commercial real estate and development, he’s always wanted to have at least one investment in Taos.

“Hampton Inn got us in the door. There is untapped potential, not just for hospitality business, but the overall complexion of business in Taos,” he said. Batra said when all is said and done on the Hampton Inn, Holiday Inn and Don Fernando, the investment amount between he and his partners in Taos would be about \$16 million.

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