

Penns Grove's hope

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Developer envisions hotel, shops in \$65 million project

By ALAN GUENTHER
Courier-Post Staff
PENNS GROVE

Ten years ago, actor Bruce Willis captured national headlines with an ambitious plan to rebuild Penns Grove, the faded Salem County town where he grew up.

In the movies, Willis can save humanity in a couple of hours. But in real life, the government beat him. Mired in red tape and confusion, Willis' project collapsed in 1997.

Exit the actor. Enter developer George Kearns, with a vision.

Armed with only a cell phone and determined optimism, Kearns picked up the project and now says he has major news: Practically everything Willis envisioned is about to come true.

If the oft-delayed plan finally materializes, an abandoned bank building, once robbed by gangster Pretty Boy Floyd, will be converted into a 1920s-style theme restaurant. Empty fields and tattered homes will be replaced by a 58-unit hotel, Kearns said, with banquet facilities and a view of the sun setting into the Delaware River.

As part of the \$65 million Riverwalk project, 38 shops will be built on the 26-acre site, Kearns said. Fourteen acres are on dry ground. Twelve acres jut into the water and include an island and a pier.

Artisans will sell blown-glass trinkets, Kearns said. A microbrewery will dispense its own special beer, and a restaurant will serve food prepared by Marti Mongiello, former President Clinton's executive chef at Camp David. Mongiello will also run the hotel.

"What had been a glint in the eye for so many years," Kearns said, "is now becoming a reality."

Though the start of the project has been delayed before, Kearns said construction should start in the next few months, with shops open to the public by the summer of 2006.

If his Riverwalk project succeeds, it would be a remarkable rebirth for Penns Grove, which has been scuffling since 1951, when the Delaware Memorial Bridge opened and took most of the borough's customers away.

Unemployment for the borough hovers around 13 percent, twice the state's average. The colorful speakeasies and taverns of the 1930s closed long ago.

Today, Penns Grove is among the 10 most-distressed municipalities in New Jersey. Victorian mansions line the street, "like Cape May," said Kearns, but many of Penns Grove's mansions are boarded up and need paint.

Bruce Willis is quoted in a 1995 article about his proposal that "I'd just like to see it (Penns Grove) come back to life."

When he announced in 1997 that he'd "had a change of heart" about the project, he didn't give any other reason for abandoning his plans.



JOHN ZIOMEK/Courier-Post
Developer George Kearns points to the spot where Riverwalk, part of which is depicted at top, would stand in Penns Grove.

Dave Willis, Bruce's father, still lives in town and said he's eager to see the project come to fruition.

"I'm just hoping I'm still around to see it done," said Willis, 75. He remembers when thousands of people came to Penns Grove to catch the ferries that shuttled traffic across the river.

The most unusual proposed element of the project, having video lottery terminals in floating casinos anchored off the end of a rebuilt pier, is unlikely to happen, said Greg Patterson, spokesman for Delaware Gov. Ruth Ann Minner.

Video lottery terminals would be illegal in Penns Grove, or anywhere else in New Jersey, which permits gambling only in Atlantic City.

But there's a technicality.

In a quirk dating back to 1682, the Delaware state border extends across the river, almost to the Jersey shoreline. So, if casinos were built at the end of the pier, jutting into the water, New Jersey could not, legally, stop the plan.

But Delaware can, and it will, said Patterson.

"For five years, the governor has consistently opposed expanding gambling anywhere beyond the locations where it is right now," said Patterson.

New Jersey Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-Paulsboro, said he supports Kearns' Riverwalk project, though he'd have serious reservations about any development that could take revenue away from Atlantic City's casinos.

"George Kearns has a vision," said Burzichelli, "and it's my impression that it can work with or without any casinos."

Another developer, Hannalily LLC, would actually build the casinos, if they were to be approved. Kearns said casinos would provide an "economic engine" and a huge influx of people.

But he's prepared to provide a replacement attraction. Tall ships would help draw tourists to the end of a rebuilt pier, he said, and hide the industrial plants on Delaware's side of the river.

Kearns has secured \$2 million in state and federal funding and has letters of commitment from investors interested in Riverwalk.

Local officials have approved the project. Salem County's freeholders support it. And former South Jersey Assemblyman Kenneth Gewertz has been working behind the scenes to help the Riverwalk plan.

"What George has done," said Gewertz, "is to provide hope to a town that is trying to come back. The bottom line is, this will help the whole region."

Rich Myers, manager of a hardware store near the site, said he's cautiously optimistic that the project can get going soon.

"If it ever actually starts," he said, "it will bring a lot of good things to the town. It will be good if it happens."

Reach Alan Guenther at (856) 317-7871 or aguenther@courierpostonline.com

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