

## Vantage investing up to \$20M in Lexington Hotel & Conference Center

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By Karen Brune Mathis, Managing Editor

By the end of 2016, Vantage Hospitality Group hopes to complete a \$15 million to \$20 million renovation of the Lexington Hotel & Conference Center Jacksonville Riverwalk.

The extensive work will include a top-to-bottom update that, among other changes, will conceal some of the painted interior pipes that served as part of a décor designed 34 years ago to resemble the interior of a ship.

"It's a great structure," said Bernie Moyle, COO and CFO of Vantage Hospitality.

He said Tuesday the hotel has "good bones" but needs a full makeover.

Vantage Hospitality will retain a nautical theme, but in the colors of blue, gray and white with organic accents, replacing the current color scheme. Drop ceilings will minimize some of the exposed mechanical elements.

Gary Rito, president of the Vantage Hospitality affiliate Brown Nester Hospitality Services, said Tuesday the work should start in October with the first phase of guest-room remodeling.

Brown Nester will manage the hotel renovations, whose cost comes on top of the \$9 million purchase price in June.

The first phase will encompass one wing of 144 rooms and hall corridors in the 323-room hotel.

Rooms will be renovated in phases with new carpeting, windows, balconies, doors and furnishings as well as redesigned bathrooms.

The hotel will remain open during the project.

The work will include an exterior re-facing, roof replacement, new windows, a renovated porte cochere in the front, the addition of a porte cochere at the entrance of the convention center in the back along Prudential Drive, a remodeled pool area and a redesigned fifth-floor terrace.

In the ground-floor public areas, the lobby, lounge and restaurant will see significant upgrades. Carpeting will be replaced by hard flooring and new furnishings will be added throughout, in addition to the drop ceilings.

The lobby will be redesigned and moved closer to the front, opening up a sight-line to the pool area. It also will have a coffee bar and an art wall and water feature that will front most of the elevators, which now are exposed.

The expanded lobby lounge will be rebuilt with a loggia so that part of the seating area will be outside under cover.

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Lobby looking at elevators

The fitness center will be renovated and the ground-floor restaurant will be renovated with a covered outdoor seating area.

The Avis Budget vehicle rental office will remain.

Also on the ground floor, the hotel has 35,000 square feet of meeting space that will be upgraded but probably not reconfigured. Rito said the convention area worked well as designed.

Upon buying the property, the company immediately addressed deferred maintenance and other operational issues.

Moyle said the hotel already has replaced a lot of the back-of-the-house systems and will make more renovations to staff areas as well as rebuild a service elevator.

Phoenix Building Corp. SE of Stuart is the contractor and David L. Wallace and Associates of Dunedin is the architect.

Coral Springs-based Vantage Hospitality paid \$9 million in June for the hotel on 5.8 acres at 1515 Prudential Drive on the Downtown Southbank and branded it as Lexington.

The property had been foreclosed and was bank-owned.

Moyle and Rito said the hotel is working to determine the hotel's parking needs and how those will be affected after the surrounding property is sold.

Property around the hotel is owned by a South Florida group that is selling parts of it, including some parking lots, to developers.

Moyle said the plan is to meet with the new neighbors to discuss parking options with them.

Moyle said the hotel owns parking and also could use spaces in a nearby city-owned garage. Rito said he was working with parking consultant Mark Rimmer on a plan to use spaces in the Kings Avenue garage as needed.

"I think we'll get it worked out," Moyle said.

The five-story hotel was built in 1981 as a Sheraton. It also has operated as a Radisson and most recently was a Wyndham.

Created in 1999, Vantage Hospitality is a privately held company that says it is among the world's top 10 franchises based on the more than 1,200 properties.

Its legacy brands include Americas Best Value Inn and the Lexington by Vantage collection of inns, hotels and suites.

The Jacksonville Lexington is owned by the company under LexDevCoJax LLC.

Rito said Vantage was looking at another area property but declined to identify it.