

Cardwell, Randall Conclude Purchases of Two Decatur Landmarks

By Gary Minich

Developer John Cardwell envisions the Holiday Inn Select Conference Hotel as a resort destination for families within a 500-mile radius of Decatur, as well as a local playground.

Cardwell and partner Jim Randall concluded purchases of two Decatur landmarks — the Holiday Inn from Raynor Hotels Co. and Fairview Plaza from a group of East Coast owners

“The Decatur Holiday Inn attracts more conventions than any other down-state site,” Cardwell noted. “But there is a lot of business it doesn’t get (because of the perception) there is nothing else to do here. We’re going to change that.”

By 2002, Cardwell plans to add a water park/amusement park to the Holiday Inn grounds, and alter the character of the 28-year-old hotel by adding more restaurants, a shopping mall, extended-stay suites, luxury accommodations for “high end” clients and packaged entertainment, such as sailing on Lake Decatur, golf weekends, canoe trips on the Sangamon River and tours of area art galleries and museums.

“We’re going to make it so that if you can’t find it here, it doesn’t exist.”

Cardwell and Randall Hospitality Services LLC also owns Country Inn & Suites and the Ramada Inn near Hickory Point Mall and a Comfort Inn in Jacksonville.

Cardwell said the three local hotels will help the Holiday Inn marketing staff in attracting larger conventions.

“By providing shuttle service (between the locations) we can offer up to 500 rooms,” he said.

Cardwell also hopes to make Decatur a resort destination by offering a wide variety of accommodations and entertainment.

He has contracted with a New Mexico-based amusement park designer on plans to convert about 13-acres of the site into an indoor-outdoor amusement park.

Outdoors fun will include a water park with slides, a wave pool and continuous flow “lazy river,” as well as figure-8 go-kart tracks, pony rides and a mini-mall of shops.

That area currently contains tennis courts and a small lake, said General Manager Darrell Sims.

Indoors, Cardwell plans an expanded arcade and a shopping mall in the main corridor. Theme restaurants, including a pizza parlor and sports bar, will be added to the Holidome.

And, if that isn’t enough variety for guests of the hotel, he is considering a stainless steel, ‘50s retro diner — similar to the one Cardwell and Randall Enterprises operates in Mount Zion — for the front west corner of the Inn’s parking lot.

Guests here for business meetings may decide to bring their families along for the next meeting, or come back on their own.

“It’s a fantastic opportunity to develop a whole new destination for the Midwest,” said Sims.

Cardwell has purchased a 17-passenger shuttle bus and plans to “keep it busy ferrying hotel guests to downtown Decatur and back.”

Hotel guests will be told they can catch a return shuttle every half hour from Village Mall in Decatur Public Library’s parking lot.

The shuttle will also be used for cultural tours of Decatur and ferrying guests to Lake Decatur, area golf courses and to and from airports, including Bloomington-Normal Regional Airport, Peoria and St. Louis.

The Decatur Holiday Inn was built in 1972 by Raynor Hotels Co. With nearly 400 rooms, it has long been popular for state conventions and weekend meetings. Earlier this year, it decided to get out of the hotel business.

Cardwell said the hotels accounted only for about 10 percent of the New Jersey firms overall revenues.

“This was the last of their (hotel) holdings. They put it on the market with a broker in Arizona. Before shopping it to other hotel companies, he decided to find out whether there was any local interest.”

Cardwell said owning Country Inn & Suites has demonstrated there is a need for more extended stay accommodations here. So, 88 of the Inn’s 383 rooms will be con-

verted into 44 two-room suites favored by employees in transition or on temporary assignment with one of Decatur’s multinational companies, such as Archer Daniels Midland Co. or Caterpillar Inc.

Another need not now being met in Decatur is for luxury accommodations, Cardwell said.

One floor of the Inn will be designated a concierge floor with guests getting first class treatment, including limousine service, bellboys and valet parking.

Denene Wilmeth, executive director of the Decatur Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, said Cardwell’s plans should boost Decatur tourism.

“It’s just going to be fantastic for the community and for Central Illinois,” she said. “It’s going to make us a tourist destination, and that’s really great because we have really neat things.”

Plans for Fairview Plaza, Decatur’s oldest shopping center, are less developed.

The purchase was spurred by the difficulty in getting owner decisions on improvements to attract potential new tenants and other matters, Cardwell said.

Several national chains have shown interest in leases, pending an upgrade in appearance. Cardwell said the site will be landscaped and the parking lot will be improved as soon as possible. After that will come facade improvements and interior remodeling, much of which depends on the wishes of potential new tenants.