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Weekapaug Inn project blends history, technology

Edifice will have 42,000 square feet, restaurant, large pool heated by geothermal wells

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WESTERLY — In the middle of the hive of construction work at the Weekapaug Inn, Langdon B. Wheeler seems to see clearly what is yet to come.

As he loped up stairways and climbed through a window opening to get to the scaffolding near the rooftop recently, Wheeler invited visitors to imagine what the inn would look like when it reopens in October 2012: a qui-



Co-owner Langdon Wheeler says cedar shingles are headed for the roof of the historic Weekapaug Inn, which was rebuilt in 1939.

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WEEKAPAUG

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Revival retains elegant style

et, understated, elegant getaway.

Wheeler is the new co-owner of the inn, which he bought on April 1, 2010, with Charles M. Royce, the man behind the rebuilding of the luxurious Ocean House hotel, which opened in May 2010 in nearby Watch Hill.

Both men made their careers in the investment business. Wheeler, who said he is semi-retired, founded Numeric Investments LLC, of Boston, and Royce started The Royce Funds, based in New York.

Wheeler is directing the Weekapaug Inn renovation, which he said will cost between \$10 million and \$20 million.

Royce and Wheeler purchased the inn from longtime owners James and DeeDee Buffum, who started a renovation but ran into trouble getting financing after the banking crisis in 2008. The project qualified for state historic-preservation tax credits before the state legislature ended that program, and those credits, a maximum of \$4.3 million, based on a maximum construction cost of \$17.5 million, have transferred to the new owners.

Wheeler declined to reveal the sale price, but said the transaction also involved taking over debt. It also involved a transfer of corporate shares, so it was never recorded at Town Hall, according to Westerly Town Manager Steven T. Hartford.

The Buffum family had owned the Weekapaug Inn since it opened, in 1899. The original proprietors were Frederick and Phoebe Buffum, and their son, Frederick C. Buffum Jr., who rebuilt after the original inn was destroyed by the Hurricane of



The space that will contain the new dining room of the Weekapaug Inn offers a view of the water and the countryside. The inn is being renovated by new owners Langdon Wheeler and Charles Royce. They are planning on opening in October of next year.

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1938. The inn was moved from the barrier beach to a more protected peninsula overlooking Quonochontaug Pond and Block Island Sound.

When the 42,000-square-foot inn reopens next year, it will be a year-round operation with a restaurant, fitness center, and a large lap pool heated by onsite geothermal wells. The new owners decided to remove a 1970s-era addition and reduce the number of guest rooms to 27, from 67. The inn's low ceilings and original stairways will be preserved, but there will be modern conveniences,

including Wi-Fi, elevators and air conditioning.

The old bathhouse next to the Weekapaug Yacht Club was torn down, and the new cedar bathhouse has been designed to accommodate wraparound lockers, showers, dressing rooms and a snack bar.

There will be four condominiums in the main inn building, and they will be rented for the first few years, Wheeler said. Plans to build two or three freestanding cottages on the inn property are still under

consideration.

The expansion from summers only to year-round was initially a concern to some in the Weekapaug community, according to Wheeler and Nancy Taylor. Taylor is working on the interior architecture and design with project architect Robert Ornstein.

When the Buffums' renovation efforts faltered, Taylor said, some abutters wanted to see the inn destroyed and the land sold for single-family house lots.

Taylor, who owns a home in Weekapaug, said her entrée to the inn project was that she designed the Wheelers' Weekapaug home. That house was purchased for \$9.3 million in 2004, but Wheeler's family was among the first to summer in Weekapaug. Wheeler "had his eye on that house for his whole life," Taylor remembered.

Although the restored Weekapaug Inn will share administrative staff with the Ocean House, including manager Daniel A. Hostettler, Wheeler promised that the Weekapaug Inn would retain its distinct identity. "I don't want to smother the personality of the Weekapaug Inn," he said.

Taylor said many items from the historic inn will be restored and reused. "We're using everything we can possibly retrieve," she said.

When buying new things, Taylor said, she is using Rhode Island resources, including Westerly granite, and upholstery work is going to Rhode Island work rooms. When the inn is completed, it will employ between 25 and 30 full-time employees, and about double that

number during the summer.

New England Construction Rumford is the contractor. At present, 30 to 40 construction workers are on site daily, but that number is expected to increase to 75 in spring. Another Weekapaug resident, architect Chris Schmitt, signed the Fenway Annex, a building that will house the fitness center/yoga studio on the ground floor, and above, three guest rooms with rooftop decks.

Although room rates at the Weekapaug Inn will be in the luxury range, the inn project isn't expected to be an especially profitable venture. Wheeler said he and Royce hope to recoup the money they have invested and see the inn become a center for community life in Weekapaug as well as a desirable resort. For Royce and Wheeler, "there is really no financial advantage ... whatsoever," Taylor said. "To take over this inn that's been in the same family for four generations, ... to diplomatically move into being part of today, as well as being a strong presence from the past ... takes a fair amount of character and skill," Taylor said. "It was hard on the Buffums to lose the inn," she added. "It's hard to imagine a thing more uncomfortable."

The Buffums, who live next door to the inn site, have been extraordinarily gracious and helpful throughout the renovation process, Wheeler said.

The whole inn project "just seems to be filled with good will," Taylor said. "Something very special is going to happen here."



A view of the inn with renovation construction framing visible as seen from across Weekapaug Pond.

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