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Harlem Looks Up, in Plans for a 29-Story Hotel Tower

By ALAN FEUER

Harlem, which has everything from an Old Navy shop to a Disney store these days, has been without a major hotel since 1966, when the Hotel Theresa, where Fidel Castro once stayed while visiting the city, closed for good.

This morning, however, real estate developers and a group of investors that includes Gene Autry's widow and the president of Def Jam Records planned to announce the construction of a Marriott Courtyard Hotel in a parking lot near the 125th Street Metro-North station.

An artist's rendering of the building shows a soaring 29-story glass structure that will hold more than 200 hotel rooms, some 250,000 square feet of office space and another 46,000 square feet for retail businesses. It will also include a public park and a sidewalk cafe that promise to brighten a dingy central Harlem intersection where the elevated train now runs the length of upper Park Avenue.

The planned hotel is yet another sign that Harlem, which in the last 10 years has undergone a boom, is continuing its second major renaissance.

"Harlem, in my opinion, is the gateway to Manhattan," said Michael Caridi, one of the principal developers. "Eastern Harlem and western Harlem have both been developed, but between Park Avenue and Fifth Avenue there was an open space. Hopefully, this project will join the east and west."

Mr. Caridi said he envisioned executives commuting by Metro-North to their offices in the Harlem complex. He said he could also imagine the Marriott attracting major conventions and business travelers because of its proximity to La Guardia Airport on an intersection where he said about 270,000 people pass by

each day.

The developers plan to break ground next spring, he said, and open the hotel and office complex by December 2005.

Interest in the project has been remarkable, the developers say. Starbucks has already signed a contract to place a coffee shop inside the complex. There have been inquiries from large financial institutions and a few national restaurant chains, which the developers said they could not yet mention by name. Several companies have also expressed interest in the office space, they said.

The project is expected to cost about \$190 million. Some of that money is expected to come from the city and state and some from a group of private investors.

One of the first investors to come on board was Jackie Autry, the widow of Gene Autry, the cowboy entertainer. Ms. Autry is a friend of Raymond Caldiero, one of the principal developers, and wanted to broaden the scope of her investments from the American West to the urban heartland.

"I'm keenly interested in getting people back to work," she said. "Gene, after all, grew up as a dirt farmer to become one of the wealthiest people in America."

The developers have promised Community Board 11, which represents the neighborhood, that a share of the 1,500 to 1,800 jobs that will be created by construction and occupancy will go to local residents.

"We certainly welcome any new development on 125th Street and look forward to the jobs," said David Givens, chairman of the community board.

Harlem itself, in fact, was a major attraction to the developers.

"There is something special and unique in continuing the revitalization of this community," said Jeff Fried, who helped put together the development team.

Because Kevin Liles, the president of Def Jam Records, has invested in the project, Mr. Fried went on, it could mean that the office complex will house tenants in the music industry.

Over the years, a handful of efforts have been made to develop hotels in Harlem, but none of them so far have succeeded. What exists in the neighborhood today is a smattering of bed-and-breakfasts.

A little more than a year ago, Mr. Caridi was driving through Harlem and saw a parking lot for the New York College of Podiatric Medicine on the southwest corner of 125th Street and Park Avenue. Mr. Caridi thought that it would make a perfect place to build an office tower. He got in touch with the college, which coincidentally was looking to secure its endowment. Mr. Caridi offered to pay them for the property with a long-term lease.

He then got in touch with Mr. Caldiero, a former executive for Marriott, who suggested they put up an office building connected to a major hotel. "At that point, I contacted Marriott," Mr. Caldiero said, "and the interest became expanded. We met with Marriott and basically put together a deal."

As part of the deal, the developers have hired an architect, Enrique Norton, who has promised to make his building fit in gracefully in Harlem.

"The streets of Harlem have great energy and great intensity," Mr. Norton said. "People use the streets much more than in other neighborhoods. They sit there all day long, using urban spaces as their living rooms. We want to be able to offer that same spirit and energy back to Harlem."

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