

Watkins hotel to open in early '08**Four-story, \$14M facility will be on Seneca Lake waterfront.**

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WATKINS GLEN -- A groundbreaking will be held later this month for the long-awaited hotel project planned on the Seneca Lake waterfront area in Watkins Glen.

The \$14-million, four-story Watkins Glen Harbor Hotel is expected to open in the first quarter of 2008, said David Hart, president and chief executive officer of Hart Hotels Inc. of Buffalo during a news conference Monday.

The foundation work for the building will be completed this year and then covered, said Hart. Work will resume next year when the structural steel is put in place.

The hotel will stand on a 2.8-acre triangular-shaped parcel bounded by First, Franklin and Decatur streets near the village's waterfront area. The hotel will not be affiliated with any national chains.

It will hold 104 rooms and suites, a ballroom, indoor pool, fitness center and 300-person conference facility.

It is expected to create the equivalent of 60 full-time jobs and generate about \$4 million in revenue annually.

Watkins Glen Village Mayor Judy Phillips and J. Kelsey Jones, executive director of Schuyler County Partnership for Economic Development, said the project will be a welcome addition to the village's tourist trade.

Tourists sometimes have to stay in Elmira, Ithaca or Corning because of the lack of lodging in the village, said Phillips, and some NASCAR fans stay as far away as Binghamton.

"We need to bring them back here," said Phillips.

The project is different from the hotel originally announced in June 2002, when Gov. George Pataki visited Watkins Glen and coupled the hotel's construction with the creation of an Empire Zone in Schuyler County.

Four years ago, the 85-room hotel was to cost \$5.5 million and create the equivalent of 20 full-time jobs.

Since then, the project's design has been tweaked and fine-tuned as the company has become more familiar with the Watkins Glen market, Hart said.

"The floor of our architect's office is covered with rejected designs," said Hart. "Almost all of the public facilities are on the lakeside and provide a backdrop of Seneca Lake."

Hart Hotels is an independent hotel management company that operates 12 hotels with 1,850 rooms in four states. It maintains franchise affiliations with Intercontinental Hotels Group, Hilton Hotels and US Franchise Systems. In the Finger Lakes region, the company owns and operates the Holiday Inn in Ithaca and The Inn at the Finger Lakes in Auburn.

Hart Hotels also operates three independent hotels -- the Portland Harbor Hotel in Portland, Maine; the Inn at the Finger Lakes; and the Yarrow Hotel and Convention Center in Utah. The company's hotels usually average 150 to 160 rooms.

Hart said his company's new hotel will capitalize on the tourists drawn to Watkins Glen by races held at Watkins Glen International and the region's wineries.

"We also think the new hotel will create demand when we promote and sell the small meeting rooms and the conference facilities. Other hotels in the area absorb the demand that already exists."

Phillips said she was part of the original Watkins Glen Tomorrow planning sessions of the 1970s, when the idea of a lakeside convention hotel was first mentioned. Since then, the development along the waterfront has occurred in a piecemeal fashion. She said she was excited the area could now accommodate a new convention center/hotel.

"From May to October, all of the existing hotels are full, so this project will be a real plus when it happens," said Phillips.

Jones is keeping his eye on the impact the new hotel is expected to have on the village during the winter months, when tourism dips.

"A lot of the village's small businesses struggle during the off-season, so this project could have huge benefits. When they come, we're liable to see others follow," said Jones.



This artist's sketch shows what the south side of the new Watkins Glen Harbor Hotel will look like when it is built.

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