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EpiCentre will go Aloft with center's hotel component

Charlotte Business Journal - by Ashley M. London

Starwood Hotels & Resorts, the company behind The Westin, confirmed to TT this week that it will bring a 175-room hotel to the EpiCentre project at College and Trade streets.

It will be one of Starwood's newest select-service brands called Aloft Hotels, which focuses on Gen X travelers.

"It's like a limited-service W," says Afshin Ghazi, the developer of the \$100 million EpiCentre. "It's a really cool, hip, concept."

Charlotte was one of the first franchise applicants to be a test market for Aloft, Starwood officials say.

"In true W Hotel fashion, we have positioned this brand in a way that has resonated with developers," said Ross Klein, W Hotels president, in an online statement posted on Hotel Interactive. "Our first five partners are ready to ease on down the road, bringing a sassy, refreshing oasis to the market."

Aloft signatures include its 24-hour gourmet food component, re:fuel, and destination bar w xyz.

Guest rooms feature nine-foot ceilings and full-height windows that give the brand its loft-like feel.

"The deal is done," Ghazi says.

Every couple of years, rumors crop up that uptown dining staple Gus' Sir Beef is closing -- only this time the talk has some teeth. Owner George Bacogeorge confirms he is seriously considering closing the 324 S. Tryon St. restaurant.

"It's not a for-sure deal yet, but I will know by March 1," he says.

The last time such talk started swirling around town was in 2003, when a couple of customers misunderstood that the restaurant was closing for repairs.

At that time, the meat-and-three eatery got a makeover that included new wallpaper, carpeting and paint.

Gus' Sir Beef has operated uptown since 1993. Bacogeorge and his brother own another Gus' Sir Beef at 4101 Monroe Road. "We are talking about whether or not we want to stay downtown," Bacogeorge says.

The neighbors surrounding **Eastern Federal's** proposed mixed-use project for Selwyn Avenue have concerns over the size of the development -- and are poised to file a protest petition with the city next week to ensure their worries are addressed.

"We are supportive of efforts that will benefit our community," says Will Barr, a resident of Glendale Road. "We want to be good neighbors and ensure this is a mutually beneficial deal. But we are prepared to file this petition."

The developer filed a rezoning proposal last month outlining plans for the former Manor House site that call for a cluster of residential buildings ranging from two to five stories, a two-level parking deck and a range of retail and office spaces.

Barr says neighbors on his street object to the plans in their current form. "Our goal is to say we are organized, we take this seriously, we have concerns that need to be addressed and we want to sit down at the table with you," he says.

The main concerns of the neighbors involve the way the development could affect the neighborhood's safety and security, as well as its impact on property values. "We are committed to having this resolved in a manner that ensures or maintains the integrity and the benefits of our neighborhood," Barr says. "We don't want to be contentious or confrontational."

Carter Meiselman, Eastern Federal CEO, is surprised by the opposition. "In the numerous lengthy meetings we have had with our neighbors over the last two months, no one has given us even the slightest indication that they felt the need to take such a confrontational step, particularly in the first week of a 120-day rezoning process. We will continue to work diligently with them through the process."

BofA, start your engine! The buzz in banking and racing circles is that **Bank of America** is in talks to become the "Official Bank of NASCAR."

That title is held by SunTrust, which inked a sponsorship deal with NASCAR in 2004. SunTrust declines to say when its multi-year agreement comes to an end, but sources say it expires after the 2006 season and BofA is in final negotiations to take over in 2007.

"As a sponsorship marketing leader, we regularly look at new opportunities to deepen and enhance our sponsorship programs, but we don't comment on speculation about our strategy," says a BofA spokeswoman.

A SunTrust spokesman says the Atlanta-based bank's deal with NASCAR has been a "successful, mutually beneficial relationship, and we look forward to continuing to build upon it and our commitment to the sport going into the future."

BofA already has a major sponsorship deal with track operator Speedway Motorsports, owner of Lowe's Motor Speedway.

Morton's, The Steakhouse SouthPark teamed with Levine Children's Hospital last week for a fund raiser benefiting The Joining Hearts Pediatric Cardiology Fund. More than 300 guests attended the event to raise \$50,000 -- including one who would be born later that night.

Amy and Martin Welton and their families established The Joining Hearts Pediatric Cardiology Fund to celebrate the short life of their son, Charles, who was born with a heart defect in 2004.

Amy, nine months pregnant, had worried she would deliver their new baby before the event, preventing her from attending. But the little one was patient. Just four hours after the gathering ended, Amy and Martin were at the hospital welcoming a healthy baby girl they named Avery.

Proceeds from Morton's event will help fund educational opportunities for the pediatric cardiac team members at The Levine Children's Hospital and support ongoing research.

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