

2 downtown hotels' managers hope renovations will restore the buildings to their former glory

By Steve Lackmeyer
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JOHN WILLIAMS and Phillip King are two veteran hotel operators who at first glance appear to be on almost identical missions.

They will be downtown Oklahoma City's newest innkeepers, overseeing almost every detail in two of the city's oldest historic properties -- the Skirvin Hilton and the Colcord Hotel.

When the Colcord was built in 1910, it was the city's first skyscraper. The Skirvin was built one year later; it was the city's most prestigious hotel until its demise in the 1980s.

Renovations on both buildings started last year. King expects to open the Colcord in September, while Williams is under strict orders to have rooms ready for the Big 12 basketball tournament in March 2007.

Over the next few weeks, Williams and King face similar challenges: hiring staffs, dealing with complications related to historic restorations, and creating a buzz for not just one, but two historic hotels amidst downtown's continued renaissance.

"The hardest part right now, and I'm sure Mr. Williams will agree, once you're into a renovation of an old building, there are any number of things that can pop up that can add to the cost," King said. "We are constantly looking out for those, and then trying to figure out a better way to do something. A renovation is far harder than ground-up construction."

At least King has a staff in nearby Tulsa, where he managed the Ambassador Hotel. Both the Colcord and Ambassador are owned by King's boss, Paul Coury. And King is no stranger to Oklahoma City. He was born here; his grandparents once owned a farm at NW 10 and Purdue; and he graduated from Putnam City West High School.

Williams has no staff, and an empty office. Until January, he had never set foot in Oklahoma City. He was manager of the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee, the flagship hotel for his employer, Marcus Hotels and Resorts. Williams was preparing for a multi-million dollar renovation of the 113-year-old landmark Pfister when company president Bill Otto asked him to take charge of the Skirvin.

Williams brought his wife and 15-year-old son to Oklahoma City for a long weekend, toured the city, and quickly agreed this would be their new home.

"We liked what we saw," Williams said. "The people are friendly. There is no doubt this hotel will come back and be an integral part of the city. It's a no-brainer."

He has spent the past couple of weeks meeting downtown leaders, mixing with Bricktown merchants, and learning about downtown's redevelopment.

King, a proud Tulsan, has watched downtown Oklahoma City's turnaround for years, and admits it inspired his hometown to pass its own improvements package, Vision 2025.

Neither man is a stranger to restoring and opening historic hotels. King was hired by Coury in February 1999, seven months before the developer finished restoring the Ambassador from what was a burned-out shell of a building condemned by the city of Tulsa.

And one of Williams' earliest jobs was as an assistant general manager overseeing a \$40 million restoration of the 80-year-old Stoffer Tower City Plaza -- now the Renaissance -- in Cleveland.

King has been following Williams' arrival in Oklahoma City. He's impressed that Williams is already involved in the state's hotel association.

King also thinks Williams has the tougher job. The Colcord is privately financed, and isn't bound to historic preservation regulations that guide the Skirvin's restoration.

So while Williams is being required to maintain wide hallways on floors in the Skirvin, the Colcord's upper floors were gutted completely and the marble walls were removed and stored in the basement.

The Colcord also will be a boutique operation, with only 108 rooms, little meeting space, and restaurant and bar operations leased to private operators.

The Skirvin will be a 225-room conference hotel, with meeting rooms and banquet halls, full-service restaurant and lounge.

Williams is renting an apartment in Deep Deuce, but is planning to buy a home in a historic neighborhood, maybe Heritage Hills or Crown Heights.

King will remain a Tulsan. "I'll live down here for a while, but I have no intention of moving away from Tulsa. I'll be waiting to see who rises to the surface and can run the place," he said referring to the Colcord.