



RYAN DORGAN / NEWS&GUIDE

Tim Erkelens-Probst, a member of the transition team, and Alyssa Rush help a guest check in Tuesday at The Virginian Lodge. The lodge and saloon, owned by the Napierskie family since 1965, recently sold to Orion Companies, a local building and development group, and Waterton, a Chicago real estate company.

New Virginian owners prepare for makeover

Changes will include turning the saloon into a 'family-style bar and restaurant.'

By Mark Huffman

The Virginian is headed to a future that does not include one of Jackson's most colorful and sometimes scruffier bits of history.

The Virginian Saloon is no more, the space shut and the windows papered over as the Virg's new owners prepare to turn it into what they call "a family-style bar and restaurant."

Sale of the Virginian — the saloon, the lodge and liquor store, the RV park, everything on the 13 acres — was signed Friday. Descendants of founders Glenn and Virginia Napierskie did the selling.

No Virginian Saloon will be a big change. The place has been a mainstay in Jackson since the 1960s, and was the sort of place with an afternoon clientele and where the last loyal drinkers had to be herded out at closing time.

The saloon was also the last food and drink joint in Jackson where you could smoke a cigarette. That cough-inducing tradition didn't end until 2012, three years after any other place in town allowed the customers to smoke 'em if they had 'em, and five years after county health officials began fighting for a smoking ban. Most bars and restaurants just gathered up the ashtrays when the ban became a public debate, not waiting for a law; the Virg actually led the fight against the ban, arguing that no one was being forced to come in and breathe the gritty air.

The new owners have promised no jarring changes but are set on a major overhaul of the place.

On top of already shutting the saloon, they say they'll close the 170-room lodge late this year and remodel the rooms. They plan to reopen in summer 2021.

Robert Huggins, one of the principals in the new ownership, said in a statement that he and his partners "are excited and honored by the opportunity to renovate and refresh

the iconic Virginian Lodge while respecting the heritage of the property and the Napierskie family's legacy."

Huggins is the only name among the new owners publicly revealed. He is a builder who does business in Jackson as New West Builders and a principal in Orion, a group of building contractors billed as "100% locally owned." In partnership with Orion is Waterton, a Chicago firm that owns and runs hotels and apartments around the country. Waterton has assets of about \$5.3 billion.

Waterton was founded in 1995 by David Schwartz and Peter Vilim, who remain at the top. Neither owns property in Jackson under his own name. Schwartz, a member of the Chicago Real Estate Hall of Fame, told Crain's Chicago Business in 2010 that he's a climber and that his favorite place is Jackson Hole.

None of the new owners consented to an interview. All the information in this story about their plans is from a release prepared by a public relations firm.

The lodge and adjacent 103-space RV park were advertised at \$60 million. Local real estate people say they doubt the deal was for the full asking price.

Realtor Greg Prugh, who handled the sale for the Napierskie family, said the family was pleased with the deal. Working with Prugh for the Napierskies was Breezy Mulligan. Two other Prugh Real Estate agents, Brooks Woodfin and Jill Learned, advised Orion in the purchase.

The RV park has been seen as a likely redevelopment opportunity, with much talk, not from the buyers, about how it would be a good site for a dense concentration of worker housing. The owners' release said plans are to run it next year with five of the sites "transformed into stand-alone units with a 'glamping' vibe."

Other plans announced by Orion and Waterton are:

- The "family-style bar and restaurant" that the Virginian Saloon will become will have access to the lodge's interior courtyard and pool area.

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