

Putting the thrill back into Blueberry Hill

Developer aims to restore once thriving property in Doylestown

Dana M. Eckman

Richie Cunningham used to sing "I Found My Thrill on Blueberry Hill" on "Happy Days."

In early 2005, the "thrill" had left Blueberry Hill, so in August, Thomas Carroll Deignan decided to bring the "thrill" back to Blueberry Hill by purchasing the property at the intersection of Route 611 and Almshouse Road in Doylestown Township and give it a new lease on life.

Deignan found his niche years ago, and he's hoping prospective tenants will find theirs, too.

Deignan has been in the business of preserving old buildings and giving them a second life for 25 years and is always excited about the possibilities.

His company, Carrollton Development Group, set a goal to save one of the crown jewels

of Doylestown, by "preserving the past and building the future."

"We recognized the significance of the Blueberry Hill site; its former history, its former glory days," Deignan said of acquiring the property.

It's listed on the National Register of Historical Places in Doylestown Township alongside such notables as Mercer's Fonthill, Burpee's Fordhook Farm and Oscar Hammerstein's house.

Surrounded by the Barn Plaza and the Doylestown Pointe shopping centers, the Shoppes at Blueberry Hill, as it has come to be known, was purchased by Deignan with dreams of transforming it into a successful restaurant and boutique retail space, and the last four years have been spent fulfilling that vision.

Carroll Contractors, Deignan's Haverford-based



A view of the Carriage House. Thomas Carroll Deignan purchased the property in 2005.

construction company, transformed the Manor House (formerly the Inn on Blueberry Hill Restaurant), Carriage House and Barn buildings back to their original architectural splendor and donned them with eclectic flair. The company has created an enclave of retail, restaurant and professional office space.

Not so long ago, it looked much different.

It was a big mess, but a mess with plenty of potential.

"The buildings were dilapidated and literally falling down," he said. "For instance, the barn, you could barely see it," Deignan recalled, gazing at the restored and improved building. "It was so overgrown with vines and trees. Trees were growing up through the middle of it. Still, we saw something here."

What he saw was the "gateway to Doylestown" had become an eyesore and wanted to revitalize this "crown jewel" into the magnificent historic landmark it had once been.

Deignan's intention was to turn the Inn at Blueberry Hill into something the entire community could enjoy and appreciate. What he saw was a fresh vision, a golden opportunity to turn the former inn into upscale, boutique-style shops modeled after Peddler's Village in Lahaska.

Although it wasn't even on the market when Deignan found the property, without hesitation he approached then-owner John Abom to pursue the purchase of the site.

Even though competition with the neighboring Barn Plaza, Doylestown Pointe and Valley Square shopping centers had made leasing difficult, a Citibank branch opened in February and a 16,100-square-foot Learning Experience is planning an early 2009 opening.

Angelo Evangelista, a Doylestown resident and owner of Roman Delight restaurants, is planning to open The Bar N' Grille at Blueberry Hill in the

historic barn building early next year.

"We continue to experience great momentum with an onslaught of activity for the remaining two buildings," said Leslie K. Whitby, business development manager for Carroll Contractors.

Recently, the township's zoning hearing board voted to grant a variance which allows a day-care center operator, the Learning Experience, to lease the new two-story building and install an adjacent fenced-in playground area. It should open for business in early 2009.

Zoning officials decided to grant the variance only after residents and a group of neighbors from The Greens of Doylestown, a neighborhood just behind Blueberry Hill, cried out in support of the day-care center and Deignan's efforts to restore the once-prominent property. Deignan was grateful for residents' support. He credits the neighbors with boosting him to a "yes" vote.

"We are absolutely thrilled with the neighbors who came out in support of us," he said.

To Deignan, the decision was the culmination of the millions of dollars and the work he has invested into renovating and building onto the historic property.

But the developer is still seeking more tenants.

"This is not your typical retail development," Deignan said.

"If somebody's looking for plain and simple, a vanilla box, we may not be the development for them; but if somebody's looking for retail or office space that is unique, rich in history and has beautiful architectural detail, then, we are the development for them," Whitby added.

"We're not trying to fill the buildings with just anybody," Deignan insists. "In spite of the economic woes; we're still being very selective in terms of who is best compatible for the unique buildings."

"Whoever comes in here, we want them to succeed," Whitby said. "That's why it's important to us that we have the right tenants who complement each other and create synergy."

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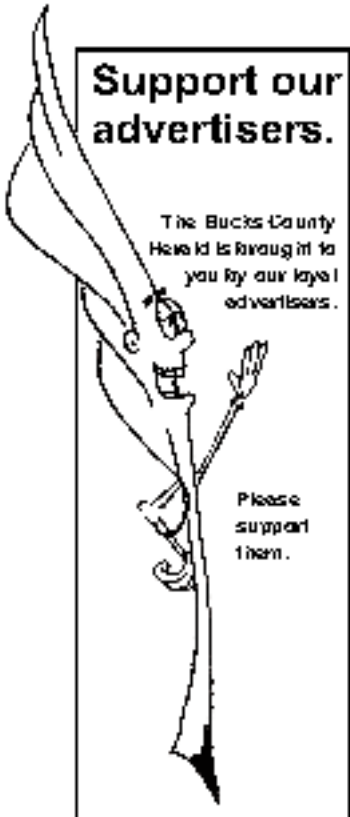
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