

# 'The White Queen of the Gulf'

The Belleview Biltmore hotel was once the largest occupied wood-frame structure in the world.

**Belleair Mayor Gary Katika** points to the late 1960s as the beginning of the Belleview Biltmore Hotel's ultimate decline.

That, he says, is when the hotel's owner at the time — a Clearwater businessman and philanthropist named Bernie Powell — started selling off land surrounding the historic structure, which led to a ring of mid-rise condominium buildings that blocked its view of the Gulf of Mexico and left the 400,000-sq.-ft. resort hotel stranded in the middle of a residential neighborhood.



▲ The resort had fallen into disrepair, with water damage throughout the interior.

"The downfall was under way," Katika says.

Railroad tycoon Henry Plant built the hotel near the Gulf in northern Pinellas County in 1897 — one of a string of palaces to which his railroad shuttled well-heeled northern visitors. Over the years, the hotel endured an evolving tourism market and a parade of owners who struggled to keep the hotel viable, even as it continued to host celebrities and dignitaries ranging from Babe Ruth and the Duke of Windsor through a string of American presidents, including Barack Obama.

As its managers neglected maintenance, the hotel deteriorated, and became so decrepit that it closed in



▲ An old postcard shows the Belleview Biltmore in its glory days.

2009. It was the last Plant-built hotel to operate as a lodging facility.

Mike Cheezem, CEO of JMC Communities, wasn't the first developer to come forward with a plan that combined demolition and redevelopment, but he is the only one who is making it happen. Other attempts failed amid strong opposition from historic preservationists, including members of the Save the Biltmore group, who wanted the entire structure saved and operated as a hotel, a project that appraisers estimated would have cost \$200 million.

Cheezem's plans include 132 condos and townhomes on the site and the preservation of a 38,000-sq.-ft. portion of the hotel, including the original lobby, which will be converted into a 35-room hotel to be called the Belleview Inn. Cheezem estimates it'll cost his firm \$13 million to renovate the 38,000-sq.-ft. portion and move it 300 feet

to put it "front and center" in his new development.

Demolition of the old hotel started in 2015, and the portion to be preserved was jacked up and wheeled to its new foundation in December. Much of the building's extremely dense heart-pine wood is being salvaged and sold — timbers are stacked in neat piles at the site, awaiting buyers who transform the planks into high-end wood floors, furniture and restaurant bars.

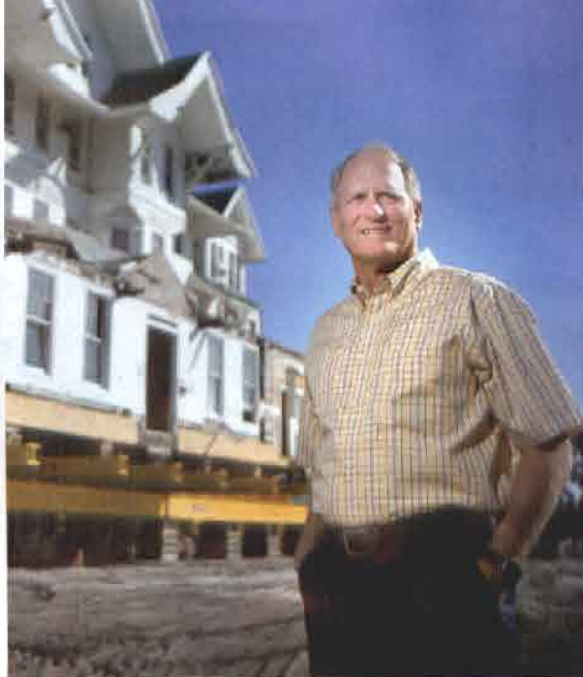
Diane S. Hein, president of Save the Biltmore, says she's grateful that at least part of the hotel was saved, but she's still unhappy that so much of it is gone. Her group, Hein says, remains "angry and outraged that most

of the beautiful Victorian 1897 Belleview Biltmore Hotel has been destroyed for real estate development for immense profits. Most of the demolished hotel will be replaced by condos and homes in order to benefit the developer, so he will make huge sums of money, all at the expense of tearing down the White Queen of the Gulf that helped develop Belleair and Pinellas County."

Cheezem says a 400-plus-room resort hotel — especially one needing millions of dollars in repairs — wasn't going to work on the site. "It was in rough condition," he says. "The roof had been compromised in so many places over the years. There was a lot of water damage. It was an unbelievable eyesore for the surrounding community. There just needed to be a solution."

Katica, Belleair's mayor, says the redevelopment is good for the town. The dormant Biltmore property, he says, has cost the city of Belleair about \$700,000 in lost tax revenue every year since the hotel closed in 2009. He says the city of Belleair's employees got their first raise in five years after the site work got under way in 2015.

"To me, this project is a win-win," Katica says. "It makes sense for everybody." ■



▲ Developer Mike Cheezem is building 132 condos and townhomes on the property. He is moving the remaining 38,000-sq.-ft. portion of the hotel 300 feet to put it "front and center" of his development.

► In its day, the Belleview Biltmore, built in 1897, totaled 400,000 square feet. The resort property spanned 160 acres.

