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One man's vision: Transforming Tuxedo into 'gateway to the Hudson'

TUXEDO PARK – On a gray February day four years ago, Michael Bruno crossed the George Washington Bridge for the first time and drove up north to see the gated community of grand historic homes he had heard about.

A real-estate junkie who made his millions with a successful online luxury flea market, 1stdibs, Bruno, 52, recalls seeing the old, run-down Dutch Colonial buildings along Route 17 between Sloatsburg and Tuxedo. Can you imagine, he recalls thinking, how this area would be transformed if these historic structures were restored and made beautiful?

Within a week, Bruno bought a Georgian estate in the Village of Tuxedo Park, a wealthy enclave of 600 within the Town of Tuxedo that is on the National Register of Historic Places. Bruno already owned an apartment in Manhattan and a beautiful home in the Hamptons, but there was an ethereal beauty about the village, with its alpine feel and pristine lakes, and he was hooked.

Within a year, Bruno found himself spending all of his time at his new home. He bought other properties in the park, and set down roots in the village, attending parties, connecting with the chamber of commerce, and participating in Rotary Club and town and village board meetings.

Now Bruno is completing the embrace of his adopted home, making his vision of a restored Route 17 corridor a reality. Bruno has purchased 13 properties on both sides of the thoroughfare in Tuxedo and Sloatsburg and plans to renovate them to their original look.

Bruno sees the buildings housing restaurants, a food market, a florist, a farmers market and antique stores, transforming the once shabby strip into a bustling foodie and antiques destination to be known throughout the region as the Gateway to the Hudson Valley.

Bruno is already alerting people to the changes ahead. The stretch of Route 17 from Sloatsburg to the northern edge of Tuxedo is bookended by two towering billboards that announce the presence of “Tuxedo Hudson Company,” Bruno’s experiment in remaking the town.

The former IGA market, now a small convenience store, will undergo a renovation and emerge in the late summer as The Tuxedo Hudson Valley Company building. It will house restaurants, a market focused on Hudson Valley produce, meats, cheese, fish and eggs, a coffee bar, an antique store, a wine and spirits shop, and a hiking and athletic-gear rental business.

The Tuxedo Junction Inn, which is now a restaurant, will become the Tuxedo Tavern and Grill, which will offer farm-to-table food in a dining area with early 1900s murals and antler chandeliers. The French Resistance will be a coffee house and café in Sloatsburg serving breakfast and lunch, and will also have an outside lounge.

The 12-acre Stewart Farm and a neighboring property will become an antiques hub, home to 25 to 30 dealers, and also an events location.

Bruno has formed a real-estate firm, Tuxedo Hudson Realty, which will sell properties primarily in Tuxedo Park, but also in Tuxedo and Sloatsburg. He has also invested in the Chester Agricultural Center, which backs local organic farming, as a source for his restaurants and market.

By the time he’s done, Bruno says, visitors driving up Route 17 will see green rolling hills, horse fences and beautifully restored historic buildings and barns that house restaurants, markets and antique stores.

Economic doldrums

Bruno is tapping into a decades-old longing in Tuxedo to see development that respects the town's historic nature and connection to the environment, yet brings growth that will lift this town of 3,600 out of its economic doldrums. For years, closed businesses have dotted Tuxedo, from the crumbling former Red Apple Rest to the attractively built Duck Cedar Plaza strip mall, which has only now found two tenants after standing stubbornly empty for close to a decade. Several large corporations, a hospital and a full-service grocer have either left town or gone out of business.

The town government has struggled with debt, dwindling resources and falling revenue. Though it raised property taxes by nearly 10 percent and cut spending by 14 percent in the past year, the town was forced to lay off 10 percent of its workforce and shutter its office on Fridays.

The town, the school district and the Village of Tuxedo Park are on the state comptroller’s list of municipalities and school districts susceptible to fiscal stress. The local high school has lost two-thirds of its population, leaving many in the community wondering how it will stay open.

No major development has occurred in the town in decades. While most neighboring towns experienced a population boom, and with it the concomitant retailers, grocery stores and medical practices, Tuxedo has seen none of that, partly because of its small population and geographic isolation.

But what other businesses have seen as a detriment to investment, Bruno sees as an advantage.

“It’s an asset that it’s a little bit forgotten and neglected,” said Bruno, “because it lets us create what we want out of it rather than fight something that has become mediocre. That’s what’s become of most places ... chain clothing to food. We don’t have that. We have all these historical buildings.”

Because many of the buildings are in a state of disrepair – some have been unoccupied for years – Bruno has been able to purchase them for modest prices. By the time he has completed the renovations and opened for business, Bruno estimates he will have spent about \$10 million. The amount is not minor, but it’s nothing Bruno is sweating about.

Promising signs

The change he hopes to bring couldn’t come soon enough for Tuxedo.

In 2014, when Genting Americas proposed a 1.6-million-square-foot casino on property surrounded by Sterling Forest, a bitter cleavage emerged in the town, pitting those who yearned for development and opportunity against those who wanted to maintain Tuxedo's historic nature and small-town feel. The state gaming commission didn’t pick Genting's project, but the battle left everyone bruised.

The community started picking up the pieces soon after the casino fight ended. Groups brainstormed on how to reach out to opposing factions and attract businesses that would be acceptable to local residents.

MyHarriman.com, a website dedicated to bringing outdoor enthusiasts to Harriman State Park and Sterling Forest, has started a shuttle bus to ferry hikers to



The Tuxedo Hudson Company office in the former Loomis Laboratory in Tuxedo Park. On any given day, Michael Bruno can be found in the dining room of Loomis Laboratory, overseeing the team he has put together to run Tuxedo Hudson Company, which seeks to revive Tuxedo. KELLY MARSH/For the Times Herald-Record

the parks from Tuxedo. Dottie Audrey Bakery/Kitchen has opened in the Duck Cedar Plaza and is fast becoming a popular hangout, and there's renewed interest in the former Red Apple Rest.

Then there's Tuxedo Farms, the biggest residential development in Orange County, one that's been stalled for three decades, but is now waiting to break ground.

For those who have been hoping for a re-energized Tuxedo, these signs are welcoming. But Bruno's project may be the most promising, with the biggest chance to change the feel and mood of Tuxedo.

He talks about turning the town into a "gateway to the Hudson."

"It's a gift" to the town, said Suzy Allman, who started MyHarriman.com a year ago.

Most small, struggling towns that pull themselves up do so by making an audacious claim about themselves and then working to make that a reality, according to Allman.

"I hope it works," Allman said. "If it works, it could save Tuxedo Farms, it could save the school in the long run, it could save the (Harriman State) park. If it all comes together."

No doubt at all

On a quick stop at Dottie Audrey's, several people stopped to chat with Bruno as he picked up coffee and an order of curried chicken. A woman eating lunch with a friend told Bruno she remembered him from a recent Town Board meeting.

"I was saying we needed a visionary the day before the meeting," she told Bruno. "And when I came in, there you were."

For some, though, Bruno's dream seems too good to be true.

"I think (his plan) is a pie in the sky," said Sally Sonne of Tuxedo Park, who has had disagreements with Bruno over the purchase of a village-owned road in Tuxedo Park. "People have tried in the past in Tuxedo ... It has failed. There really aren't enough people to keep a business going."

Bruno, himself, has no doubt at all.

There's too much activity in the region for his plan not to work, he says. Woodbury Common Premium Outlets attracts 13 million people per year. The region is home to state parks and the Storm King Art Center, and boasts wineries, breweries and fresh, organic produce. Is it such a stretch, Bruno asks, that people would stop on the way for a bite if the fare and the ambience are right?

"When you look at all the parts, it's amazing to me that people will even doubt it" says Bruno. "Why didn't someone do it sooner? That's a question."

Bruno is betting his foray will draw other eateries to Tuxedo. He would connect them to Hudson Valley suppliers - produce, meat, cheese - until "Hudson Valley First" would become a theme in the area, adding to the concept that Tuxedo is a gateway to the Hudson.

Bruno's enthusiasm can be infectious. He's passionate, personable and rich. He's also a doer.

He started 1stdibs in the early 2000s, after he fell in love with the Marché aux Puces, the Paris flea market, and wanted to make something similar available on the Internet. He recalls people mocked his idea. People won't buy antique furniture online, they said. But he persevered. Last year, he said, the company sold \$1 billion worth of furniture through its website, 1stdibs.com.

Bruno sold a big share of his company last year, and he no longer manages its day-to-day operations. He also sold one of his homes in the Hamptons, and says he is now focused on Tuxedo and Tuxedo Hudson Company, which he describes on the company website, tuxedohudsoncompany.com, as "one of the most exciting things I have ever done."

Bruno runs his operations from the Loomis Laboratory, the historic property in Tuxedo Park where the top scientific minds of the 20th century gathered in the 1930s to develop the science for the atomic bomb and radar. He purchased the Loomis Lab in 2015 for \$2.5 million, one of several properties he has bought in Tuxedo Park.

"Financially it's a good time, time-wise it's a good time, and I've become connected to the community so that it feels like home now. So now I feel it's time to give back and do something special," said Bruno. "There's no guarantee we are going to make money doing this, but I can certainly improve these properties and be a proud owner of them, and I think they'll easily pay for themselves. I don't see how we can go wrong."

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