

Developer to downsize plans for Tuxedo project



Michael Bruno stands in front of one of the four renovated Sloatsburg. [PHOTOS BY ALLYSE PULLIAM/FOR THE TIMES HERALD-RECORD]

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TUXEDO — Real estate developer and pioneering online antiques auctioneer Michael Bruno and Town of Tuxedo officials are pledging to work together to simplify and salvage Bruno's plans to redevelop key downtown buildings.

So far, Bruno, 54, of Tuxedo Park, has self-funded at least \$12 million to buy and transform several blighted buildings at two sites along a 2.6-mile stretch of Route 17 in the villages of Sloatsburg and Tuxedo. He first proposed the projects — which could reach \$19 million — in early 2016.

Nineteen months later, the stylish, gregarious mogul is converting a more than 2.5-acre site, beside the Sloatsburg train station, into a high-end leisure and recreational compound, including a four-building inn and a restaurant.

But while the ambitious Sloatsburg project could be complete as soon as October 2018, remaking the former IGA Market and the defunct Tuxedo Junction Inn has proven more challenging. Facing a parking shortage and Tuxedo's demands for more than 20 variances, over the summer Bruno withdrew his plans for an organic grocery store, a restaurant and bar with rooftop dining, plus retail at the IGA Market site.

"I'm not blaming anyone in Tuxedo," said Bruno, who pledged to submit a simpler plan. Town officials "have worked with me closely. I want this project to go through, but what I wanted required a lot of variances, and it just became too

cumbersome to get the approvals, so I withdrew the permits.”

“To the people of Tuxedo, I say, you’ve waited a long time for good things to happen here, have some faith,” Bruno added. “I’ve invested a lot of my money. I’ve shown good faith. I’m adding viable businesses to this area.”

Tough talk

Bruno’s patient interview tone contrasts with the strongly worded letter he sent late last month to Tuxedo’s elected leaders and the Tuxedo Local Development Corp., whom he urged to facilitate his development. His letter also previewed his soon-to-be-released plan to tear down the Tuxedo Junction Inn building for parking, while expanding and moving the all-natural Blue Barn Market from Sloatsburg to half of the former IGA Market building. An antiques store and office space could fill the building’s second floor, and its other half might feature two retail tenants.

Taking a tough tone, Bruno’s recent letter pleaded with Tuxedo officials to help his project come to reality much more quickly, and he’s hoping they’ll press the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to reopen the Lucky Bridge — a key trail access point that the MTA recently closed just across from the IGA Market. He’s also lobbying for up to \$1.4 million in grant funding from the Tuxedo Local Development Corp. The nonprofit corporation’s board consists of town leaders, businesspeople and development officials, who award grants to encourage municipal beautification and economic growth.

He concluded his letter by emphasizing that he could easily sell the Tuxedo buildings and just add to his Sloatsburg project. He thinks the local development corporation should provide the grant funding because his project will beautify the town, and the municipality's need for his property to have more parking means he'll likely face a loss demolishing the former Tuxedo Junction Inn to free up space for vehicles.

"If cooler heads prevail, it's just going to be a tremendous partnership" between the town and Bruno, said William Sweet, a local business leader who operates a Tuxedo financial services firm. "Bruno's vision is really powerful. It could attract a lot of people, and he has the means to get this done, but I don't think he wants to do that himself."

Tuxedo Supervisor Michael Rost and Planning Board Chairman Michael Reardon responded to Bruno's letter with diplomatic restraint.

"We're not here to stop responsible development," said Rost, who also leads the local economic development corporation's board. "We're here to help. I have all the confidence in the world that (Bruno) is going to get something going in Tuxedo. His original plans were rather ambitious, so I can see him just having to dial them back."

Reardon, who also serves on the development corporation's board, said there were just too many issues with Bruno's first plan, from parking to architectural setbacks and room for tourist buses.

“I thought his plans were fantastic, and everybody was looking forward to it,” said Reardon, who’s eager to receive a grant application from Bruno. “Unfortunately, it required a lot of variances. But the town wants him, and we’re willing to help.”

‘Vacation village’

To spend the day with Bruno, tour his Tuxedo site and visit his fast-growing Valley Rock Inn compound is to see how earnest and eager he is to develop the Route 17 corridor.

A self-described "real estate junkie," Bruno hit his first business grand slam founding 1stdibs.com, an antiques sales site, as the Internet exploded in the '90s. He first noticed the Tuxedo-Sloatsburg area's tourist potential, driving along Route 17, admiring the old houses on a gray February 2012 day.

"He wants to make this area a destination rather than a pass-through," said former Tuxedo Junction Inn owner Emily Nicholas, 28, of Greenwood Lake, who said Bruno didn't, as some locals thought, close her struggling business when he bought it. Bruno financially supported it for months before hiring Nicholas to help lead his organic market.

Bruno's Sloatsburg site plans call for a restaurant, a gym, a 75-foot long pool, a bike shop, a gallery, an arts film screening area, a coffee house with a juice bar and possibly an antiques store. At the property's edge, along Route 17, he meticulously supervises the workers turning four 160-plus-

year-old houses into bright, airy, antique and hardwood-filled rentals. One has three bedrooms, another has four, and the other two both have five.

He's already built the 7 Lakes Bike Barn, at the Valley Rock Inn compound. The connoisseur-worthy shop has changing rooms and showers for the cyclists using nearby Harriman State Park. Visitors can order from Bruno's gourmet food truck, with dishes like fish, beef and braised chicken tacos, autumnal squash toast and roasted veggie salads, and dine in an idyllic wedding-worthy courtyard. The roofless former storage space is walled off by rose vine-draped stone slabs, which ring a fountain pool surrounded by crushed white marble, umbrella-protected metal picnic tables and chairs. It abuts Bruno's little natural market, where he sells fruit and other fresh products out of a rustic old barn.

Bruno is a developer with "taste, class, attention to detail, neatness and cleanliness," said Eden Weiss, 70, of Brooklyn, and vice president of programs for the New York City Cycle Club. Weiss said Bruno could lure New York City's cyclists for week-long vacations because they already use Harriman State Park as their playground, but they want more dining, lodging and shopping in the Sloatsburg-Tuxedo area.

“It’s more than just an inn,” said Weiss, who toured the site and added that Bruno must be careful not to overprice it when it’s finished. “It’s like he’s trying to create a little vacation village.”

Tuxedo's business and community leaders are hoping Bruno will use the same sort of thoughtful development to help reinvigorate their cash-strapped municipality and its tiny, financially challenged high school. They’ve faced years of disappointment from other developers along with considerable delays in the Related Companies’ Tuxedo Farms residential and commercial project, which could eventually double the 3,600-person town.

“Both the town and Michael want to reinvigorate local business, but I think it’s just a matter of everyone getting on the same page,” said Tuxedo native Elizabeth Manko, 33, the Tuxedo Chamber of Commerce president and owner of the Tuxedo Wellness yoga and Eastern wellness arts studio.