

Resort town revival in Fox Lake

By Lee Filas Daily Herald Staff Writer
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Fox Lake is a resort town in name only these days.

During the summer boating season, the Chain O' Lakes region plays host to dignitaries and casual tourists.

However, since the Mineola Hotel & Restaurant closed its hotel business in the 1960s, **Fox Lake** has been a resort town without a single resort.

Once perceived as a thriving Route 12 corridor, the loss of dozens of resorts throughout the years contributed to transforming the former tourist magnet into a hodgepodge of marinas, used car lots, old service stations and vacant storefronts.

Village leaders say that could change with a proposal to build a 93-room hotel and attached 15,000-square-foot indoor water park on Pistakee Lake.

The resort, which could expand to a 200-room hotel and 45,000-square-foot water park by 2009, could put **Fox Lake** back on the tourism map.

"This is exactly the shot in the arm this village needs," community development director Claude LeMere said. "If everything goes according to plan, we are right back in the ball game."

LeMere and others believe it could do wonders for Route 12 and the rest of the village by boosting **Fox Lake's** tourist trade from three to 12 months. As a result, the resort would gain 110,000 new tourists each year, he said.

That's an optimistic notion of which industry experts aren't as certain.

However, no one denies hotel/water park resorts are hot commodities. Several such developments are popular tourist spots in the Wisconsin Dells and Lake Geneva.

Nineteen hotels are equipped with attached indoor water parks in Wisconsin, including 14 in the Dells. Prices often range from \$100 per night off-season to \$300 per night during peak season.

LeMere, hired by the village in 2001 to help bolster downtown redevelopment, said bringing a resort to **Fox Lake** is imperative.

"We need something big like this to spur redevelopment along that corridor," he said. "This will do amazing things for that entire area."

The project's developer is Don Peeples, of Peeples Business Development, who started his own company in 1986. His company has opened Ramada Inn franchises in San Diego and in Boulder, Colo.

Peeples and LeMere found 18 vacant acres just off Route 12, one block south of Eagle Point Road. Last month, Peeples went before the village board to discuss logistics for the project.

Hotel experts caution not to be overly optimistic about any overnight change in **Fox Lake's** tourism fortunes.

Peter Gallagher, director of communications for the Illinois Hotel and Lodging Association, said hotels are generally located where several different activities exist.

"Logically speaking, there has to be a reason for the tourist to be going there in the first place," Gallagher said. "There are a multitude of places to go to in downtown Chicago. Because of it, hotels flourish."

However, he said the addition of an indoor water park - potentially the first of its kind in Illinois - could wind up being the draw people need to visit **Fox Lake**.

"This trend started in the Wisconsin Dells and caused that area to draw tourists year-round, instead of just during the summer months," he added. "So, I don't find it absolutely inconceivable that a water park in this part could make the hotel and surrounding community spark to life."

A spokesman for a hotel and water park in nearby Lake Geneva said it's going to take more than the one hotel to draw the number of tourists Peeples and LeMere ultimately want.

Allen Anderson, director of marketing for Timber Ridge Lodge and Waterpark at Grand Geneva Resort, said the 50,000-square-foot indoor and outdoor water park and 225-room hotel 20 miles north of **Fox Lake** works well because of Lake Geneva's year-round tourist trade.

"The water park has certainly expanded our demand as a family resort, but we have always had programs in place to show our commitment to families," he said. "The water park simply adds another amenity to an established 12-month tourist destination."

Anderson said Lake Geneva has conventions and winter festivals to help draw tourists during colder months.

"Not to mention the snowmobiles, ice fishing and other amenities," Anderson said. "Lake Geneva has been a year-round destination for the last 10 years."

The proposed **Fox Lake** hotel also would have 5,000 square feet of meeting and convention space, and a "banquet boat" for conventioners to tour Pistakee Lake during the summer.

If everything goes according to plan, Peeples said, he could open the doors on the **Fox Lake** facility by April 2005. The village would need to pass a special tax financing district to make it happen.

Mayor Nancy Koske has offered her support for the project and special taxing district, saying the hotel/water park is exactly what **Fox Lake** needs.

"How can we be considered a resort and recreation community if we do not have any hotels or resorts?" Koske said. "This proposal will give us the opportunity to be what we have billed ourselves as for the last 30 years."

Resort: Developer says it could be ready by 2005