

Crowning moment

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, March 15, 2007

By Daniel Barbarisi

Journal Staff Writer



The new Westin tower, on the left, taller by several floors than the older tower, rear right, will feature hotel rooms and condominiums that are priced from \$400,000 to \$2.5 million.

The Providence Journal Sandor Bodo

PROVIDENCE — The top floors of the under-construction Westin Providence hotel and condominium tower will explode with light and color tonight, when fireworks are set off from the very top of the 32-story structure to celebrate the building's reaching a construction milestone.

Less than two years after starting, the \$130-million construction project is rushing toward a July completion date imposed by the state when the developer, Cranston-based Procaccianti Group, bought the hotel in 2005.

Procaccianti now says it will make that date without a problem. Crews have been working from 7 a.m. until 3 a.m. most days to meet the deadline, and the tower is suddenly looking less like a skeleton and more like a building. The outside, a pre-cast brick facing on concrete, will be finished by May, the developer said.

Procaccianti is even more pleased that, so far, its condos are selling.

The developer has sold 32 of the 103 units and said it has reservations on many more, although it would not disclose that number. It has leased two of the three storefronts on the ground level, one to a restaurant and one to a cigar bar, and is close to signing a lease with a retail customer for the final spot.

Tonight at 7:30, rain or shine, Procaccianti will light up the Providence sky to celebrate the "topping off" of the building, making it the tallest building erected in Providence in 34 years.

The topping off is merely ceremonial. As can be seen from most parts of Providence, the four-cornered top of the building is already attached.

Procaccianti is building two structures, a 15-story tower and a 32-story tower, to add to its Westin hotel. The addition will boast 200 hotel rooms and 103 condominiums.

The company purchased the 364-room Westin from the state in 2005 for \$95.5 million, and as part of the deal promised to have the hotel portion finished by July. Thomas Niles, Procaccianti's executive vice president for development, said the hotel will open July 17. Rooms in the new tower are already reserved for August and September, he said.

The condos are not covered under the agreement with the state and the developer can take its time finishing those. Development manager Lee Burneson said he expects to have all units ready for occupancy by October.

The developer expects the ground-level retail to open this summer, as well. Fleming's steakhouse will occupy the northeast corner of the site, offering three-season outdoor dining in a sidewalk arcade along Francis Street. A cigar bar, Cigar Masters, will hold the southwest corner. The southeast corner will host an as-yet unknown retail store.

The shorter tower will be exclusively hotel rooms, as will floors 8 through 16 of the main tower. The top 16 levels of the main tower will be filled with condominiums, priced at \$400,000 for the smallest, lowest units, up to \$2.5 million for the two massive penthouse units. Aside from the penthouses, most of the high-end units are selling for roughly \$1.5 million.

The condos will offer panoramic views of downtown and the amenities are what the developer believes will set them apart. In addition to access to all of the hotel's services, there will be a 24-hour concierge on duty and a phone call will bring groceries, fresh towels, a bottle of champagne or tickets to events around Providence.

The condos will range from roughly 750 square feet to 3,000, and each will have a balcony and share a private parking garage in the base of the building.

Procaccianti is banking on these amenities setting the Westin apart from the other condominium projects sprouting up around the city.

"The hotel has a grandeur to it," Niles said, which will translate to the condos.

"It really is what we call the hub of urban living," said Procaccianti spokesman Ralph Izzi.

Procaccianti is dramatically expanding its presence downtown. Nationally, the company has purchased its 50th hotel property and locally it has just reopened the former Holiday Inn as a Hilton Hotel and is trying to get approvals for an office tower in LaSalle Square, at the site of the former police and fire station.

Procaccianti envisions a corridor where residents can walk from a Procaccianti complex in LaSalle Square to the Hilton, through the Dunkin' Donuts Center, through the Rhode Island Convention Center, into the Westin, across the sky bridge, into the Providence Place mall and up to Nordstrom, potentially without ever going outside. If a resident is commuting to Boston, the only exposure to the weather would be the brief stretch from the mall's edge to the train station.

"It's where we think the crux of future development is in Providence," Niles said.

Procaccianti isn't alone in thinking that. The Westin is one of three high-profile condo projects downtown: Together with the others, Waterplace Park in Capital Center, and the One Ten Westminster tower on Westminster Street, more than 400 condominium units will open in Providence in the next few years. These projects were joined this winter by a 96-unit condominium project at Capitol Cove, where a planned rental apartment project under construction was recently converted to condos.

But the Westin will have an important edge over the others: its condos will open first, giving them the chance to tap the market first and lure customers to finished models while the other projects are still building. When the various projects were planned, it was expected that the three major endeavors would open at roughly the same time.

"It's always good to be the first out. At the time the expectation was that all of the units would come online at the same time," Niles said.

Being first, Niles said, gives Procaccianti an edge on the market, with Waterplace a year away and One Ten Westminster not having a shovel in the ground. Capitol Cove plans to open in June 2008.

There is a not-so-subtle competition among the development projects. Izzi was quick to point out that 32 floors means that they have a clear height — and view — advantage over Waterplace.

"Our entry level units start on the 16th floor. Our entry level point is where they max out," he said.

The construction itself has been fairly close to what was originally envisioned. The architects have made alterations to the awnings on the ground level and they have changed the design of the gabling at the peak. Originally, the design was a circle with a "P" inside. Now, it is a triangular, criss-crossed section of concrete.

James Procaccianti wanted the gable design improved because "It was not significant enough," said project architect L. Glen Allen, joking that there were other factors in play, as well: "There were some complaints that it looked too much like the Providence Bruins logo from a distance."

dbarbari@projo.com