The Intentional Tourist
by Jarrod McCartney
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By the time you read this, the Hotel Garber will likely open for business. I have to admit that there were times during the 8 year process of coming up with the idea, picking a location, and then figuring out how to fund it all, where I doubted that we'd ever finish the project. This was especially true after the project suffered logistical and material setbacks due to the COVID pandemic and the inflation that followed. Luckily, we were able to offset those increases with help from the Willa Cather Foundation and the dogged determination needed to secure grant funding from the State of Nebraska, the Nebraska Arts Council, and private individuals and foundations.

Thanks to our stick-to-itiveness, we are now set to hold a ribbon cutting ceremony and a soft opening on Friday, April 4th. The ribbon cutting will happen around 3:30pm just outside of the building and will be open to the public. The soft opening and the ability to be part of the first group of people to stay at the hotel is reserved for donors, investors, and partners. Hotel Garber staff will host an open house for the public the following week. You can book a room for any available date starting April 7th by going to www.hotelgarber.com.

Improving the number and quality of lodging options was one of the key objectives attached to my original job description. It is our group's belief that the Hotel Garber will complement the National Willa Cather Center and attract more people to visit the region. In turn, this will create an economic environment where retail and dining options can thrive and, hopefully, expand. Selecting a building downtown will help facilitate that growth as most Red Cloud businesses are within easy walking distance. Historic preservation was also one of our goals, and we have done everything possible to make the exterior of the building look and feel like it did when it was built in 1901.

All of this effort was not just because we like historic buildings. It's part of a calculated effort to make Red Cloud a unique cultural destination and add a boost to the local economy. We expect to create 10 new jobs and generate up to $7 million in total economic impact each year. This means more people in town spending more money at the places we love and support. It also means increased revenue from sales and lodging taxes. That means better City services and better support for other tourism attractions.

We were also blessed to received Tourism Development Initiative grant funding from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development and Creative District development funding from the Nebraska Arts Council to finish out work in the Hotel's lower level. This funding has enabled us to create event spaces for small group conferences and meetings and to complete our kitchen space. Together, these spaces will become the Red Cloud Creative Hub, a place for artists to create and share their talents with the community. We will partner with the Central Community College Educational Hub across the street to host classes in a variety of areas, including instruction on building culinary skills.

The Hotel will provide 24-7 food & beverage service to guests and will be open to the public for breakfast and dinner. We do need to have a restaurant available every day of the week for guests and tourists. I'm excited to see how the lounge and dining space develops and adapts to the market's needs.

As I hope the Creative Hub and restaurant spaces demonstrate, this Hotel is not just for visitors and Cather guests. The space is for the entire community. I encourage locals and alumni to book a night at the hotel or have social gatherings and meetings there. Brandi Hitchler and John Schwichtenberg are eager to hear from you and your group.

I also want to a take a moment and thank all of those whose hard efforts have paid off and resulted in our beautiful new hotel. Our Red Cloud Hotel, LLC Board is the only reason this concept got off of the ground. The original group of myself, Dennis Hansen, Ashley Olson, Jay Yost, Gene Horne, Justin Armstrong, and Liz Rasser nurtured this into existence as did former member Todd Mahin. Once the project grew and became more than our group could handle, the Willa Cather Foundation board stepped in and made sure our plans came to fruition. I want to especially thank Mark Bostock and Bob Thacker in that regard. And, of course, we couldn't have done anything without money. That's where the help of steering board members like Marion Arneson, Gary Meyer, and Gary Thompson were especially critical. I also want to highlight Ashley Olson again: this project does not happen and it does not get built without her leadership and hands on work with the grind of endless decision making related to construction and architectural details and the faith to carry on despite constant budget constraints.

While we all need to celebrate this moment, we cannot rest on our laurels. We need to do more to make Red Cloud a destination community. This means we need to build more upon our Cather related assets and our recreational assets. We need a trails system and things for people to do who are not Cather enthusiasts (I love that the Speed Bowl is happening again!). We need to build relationships with neighboring communities so that we can send people to check out what they have to offer and use Red Cloud as their overnight stay. We need to market ourselves not just to Nebraska, but to the rest of the world.

Perhaps the best way to market, however, is word of mouth. Please tell your friends and family to give us a try and consider being a tourist in your own home county as well! If you are interested in helping the project financially, there is also still time to be part of this important piece of Red Cloud history by getting your name on the donor wall. All contributions of $1,000 or more will be recognized. There are also naming rights still available for larger amounts. Please reach out at jmccartney@redcloudnebraska or 402-746-2653 if you want more information.