



The Chase on the Lake is back

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WALKER - Chase on the Lake Hotel opened in 1922 amid much fanfare as a modern-for-its-time hotel on Leech Lake in downtown Walker. It had 70 guest rooms and an acclaimed restaurant.

Over the years, the hotel continued to serve overnight guests, but became less modern. Its restaurant kept a respected reputation.

June 29, 1997, the hotel's history almost came to an end when a major fire roared through the restaurant, the lakeside end of the hotel.

June 30 this year, the hotel re-opened with 70 much larger and modern for 2008 standards guest rooms, a new restaurant called the 502 and 10 condotel units. Another 36 condotel units will open this fall.

Steve Olson, who owns homes in Leawood, Kan., and on Gull Lake bought the vacant hotel and property with a vision for what he sees as an emerging market on Leech Lake. He also owns or manages resort hotels in Storm Lake and Perry, Iowa, and in Ruidoso, N.M.

He got an early start in resort operations, because his father was a part owner in and director of operations at Breezy Point Resort when the Hopkins House owned it. He remembers starting work there when he was 13.

History keeps bringing people back, he said of his Chase customers in the first month. He wants customers to relive the Chase experience but with all the amenities of today. Some of those amenities include unseen things like fireproofing that was unavailable in 1922.

It also includes things like cable television and high-speed Internet in each room that is more easily available with his location inside the city of Walker than if he were in a rural location.

"It feels like the old Chase, but the floors are flat," his general manager, Jamie Tatge, said he hears often from guests. The old Chase Hotel had developed a noticeable slant to its floors over the years, especially in the main dining room.

Olson took thousands of photos before reconstruction began and measured the entire old building extensively. He had hoped to just strip the walls and remodel, but inspections found most of the building footings were separated from the ground under them by a gap of pure air.

Tatge said engineers they hired suspect the volume of water pumped into the burning building to save it may have washed away some of the soil.

Olson was able to save the footings for the first 30 feet from the Walker street, but had to replace all the rest of the footings toward the lake and work up. He used the original footprint, plus that for a 1980s kitchen addition and place four stories above the whole building site.

By using four stories of the one floor kitchen addition area footprint, he has been able to expand each hotel guest room to 13-by-27 feet and include a full bathroom in each. The 1922 hotel required six small guest rooms to share one bathroom, but it was indoors.

Original interior doors have been reused, but all windows - the same size and style as old ones - have been replaced with energy-efficient new ones. Olson took a piece of old molding to match color for all the new woodwork and furnishings.

Gail Levenson, Cass County Economic Development Corp. director, helped Olson obtain tax-increment financing from the city of Walker for the project and to overcome a variety of regulatory and financing hurdles he faced in a project this big.

He expects 40 percent of his business to come from groups such as business meetings, weddings and family reunions. He has focused on making the complex family friendly and also expects some of his condotel units to provide a carefree housing option to retirees who want to sell their lake home and take life easier.

The main hotel building features guest rooms, the 502 restaurant, a coffee shop and swimming pool/hot tub/sauna area. The property is easily accessible from Leech Lake by boat, because the hotel site abuts the historic Walker city dock pier.

It is connected by a covered walkway to a building that will open this fall to house 3,000 square feet of meeting space, more condotel units, his and hers steam rooms in an Aveda spa and a bowling alley.

Olson sees his property as one resorts on Gull Lake can't match. The wooded shoreline around much of Leech Lake will always be so, because it is federal, state and county forestland.

The Chase is in walking distance of Reed's Sporting Goods, gift shops and other downtown Walker businesses. He sees his business as one complementing the Walker downtown. If someone needs a fishing rod, Olson tells them to walk across the street.

The Chase is close to, and will soon have out its front door, a convergence of the Heartland and Paul Bunyan recreational trails. Boat docking on the state's third-largest lake abuts his complex.

Walker Airport has completed the first phase of an expansion.

Hotel rentals are by the night, a two- or three-day package or by the week. Condotels can be purchased furnished to rent out when owners are not using them or unfurnished if residents want to use them as their permanent home and not rent them.

Prices for the condotels range from \$250,000 to \$450,000. Some include screen porches. Most have patios or decks.

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