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New psychiatric rehabilitation center opens in Riverhead

By Jessica DiNapoli



The building at 260 West Main Street features beautiful artwork, crown molding, high ceilings and a well-equipped gym. These luxurious amenities would suggest that the building is an apartment complex or a hotel found in New York City.

But the newly renovated facility is actually located in downtown Riverhead and owned by Concern for Independent Living Inc., a not-for-profit housing agency that offers permanent shelter for those who are recovering from psychiatric disabilities. The facility, called Concern Riverhead, has been in operation since June and offers its 50 residents apartment-style living as each single-occupancy room comes with its own bathroom and kitchenette.

The residents of Concern Riverhead range in age from 18 to 60, and either have low-income jobs or are homeless, explained Elizabeth Lunde, the associate director of Concern for Independent Living. The

Medford-based organization runs similar facilities across Suffolk County and, at the present time, provides housing for approximately 550 people.

The Riverhead facility celebrated its official grand opening with a ribbon-cutting ceremony last Thursday, September 25, that was attended by local government officials and representatives of the mental health field.

Concern for Independent Living purchased the building, which was constructed in 1929 and formerly known as the Henry Perkins Hotel, four years ago. From the 1970s until 2004, the building housed the Henry Perkins Adult Home, a facility mostly known for its dilapidated condition.

For the past three years, Concern for Independent Living has invested close to \$15 million in renovating the building, with construction commencing in August 2007. Work was completed on the facility in June.

The money for the extensive renovation came from three sources, explained Steve Piasecki, the upstate coordinator for the Supportive Housing Network of New York, a housing advocacy organization. Mr. Piasecki said the New York State Office of Mental Health, the Federal Home Loan Bank and the Community Preservation Corporation all contributed to the project.

"We absolutely improved the facility," Ms. Lunde said. "We want our places to look like apartment buildings or hotels because the folks rise to the level of their surroundings." She noted that there are staffers at the facility 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

As part of the renovations, Concern for Independent Housing restored the historical architecture of the first floor of the building, including the pediments, and added office space. The agency gutted the second, third and fourth floors of the building, which now house 50 apartments.

"It was a warren of old rooms from the old hotel," Ms. Lunde said. "The Henry Perkins Adult Home ... kept almost everything from the old hotel."

Ms. Lunde noted that there might have been some renovations completed in the adult home in 1920s, shortly after the structure was built.

When Concern for Independent Housing acquired the building in 2004, there were still 120 people living there as residents of the Henry Perkins Adult Home, explained Ms. Lunde. The not-for-profit helped relocate those

residents to other mental health facilities in the area before embarking on their renovation plan, she said.

Riverhead Town Supervisor Phil Cardinale, who attended last week's ceremony, said the Henry Perkins Adult Home was "not a positive for the Town of Riverhead." He emphasized during the event that the home, which had been cited by the state for a variety of violations, was poorly managed prior to its closure.

As Ms. Lunde explained, the pristine interior of the Concern Riverhead facility is designed to help improve the mental health of its residents.

"It's nice, it's clean," said Sharon Francis, one of the 50 residents of the facility. "The staff is nice and helpful." Before moving to her new home in downtown Riverhead, Ms. Francis said she received treatment at the Buckman Center at Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in Brentwood.

The Main Street location is also convenient for residents as they are within walking distance of many small shops and a bus stop, according to Ms. Lunde. Ms. Francis noted that she takes the bus by herself when she has to run errands.

Christopher Betts, the vice president of the Albany-based Community Preservation Corporation, said the former adult home that once occupied the building had been a blight on the community for years. He said the former facility provided substandard housing to its residents.

Mr. Betts added that the recent renovations to 260 West Main Street are not only an investment in the building but in the surrounding community. "Supporting projects like this has a positive impact on property values," he said.

Town officials agreed that the new facility, one of the first buildings that greets drivers who are traveling east on Route 25 in Riverhead, improves their overall impression of the downtown area, which has seen a number of retail stores close shop in recent years following the shuttering of Swezey's Department Store.

"It's a great building to greet everyone," said Riverhead Town Councilman John Dunleavy.

"The restoration of the site is wonderful," Mr. Cardinale added.

And elected officials were not the only ones to agree with that assessment.

"Once upon a time this was a rundown adult home," said William Polchinski, a therapist at the Peconic Center on East Main Street in Riverhead, an outpatient clinic of the Pilgrim Psychiatric Center. "But Concern made it beautiful and it absolutely affects people's mental health."

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