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ALERT

URGENT

EDITOR'S PICK

Developer who has done projects across the globe now focused on Northwest Indiana

Joseph S. Pete

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NWI Development Group turned Bank Calumet into apartments.

John J. Watkins, file, The Times

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Developer Robert Harte has done projects all over the world, including in Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Monaco, Hawaii and New York State's Hudson Valley.

The Downers Grove native moved to Northwest Indiana eight years ago. Now he's investing big in Northwest Indiana, where he started the NWI Development Group.

The NWI Development Group has pursued several major projects around Northwest Indiana, several of which have revived historic properties. The company transformed the Bank Calumet tower into The Banc Apartments in downtown Hammond, created Barrelhouse The Venue at Zorn Brewing in Michigan City and turned a long-vacant publishing office at 1 Dunes Highway in Beverly Shores into the Mullet Marketplace, which is now home to several small shops like a resale boutique and a bike rental place.

The firm transformed the Cypress Log Cabin in the row of Century of Progress Homes in the Indiana Dunes National Park in Beverly Shores into a vacation rental, launching the IN the Dunes spinoff in the hope of providing more lodging within the Indiana Dunes National Park. It is renting out more than 140 vacation rental homes in Northwest Indiana and adjoining Southwest Michigan through The Wanderluxe Collection, an umbrella of its IN the Dunes, South Shore Vacation Homes and Beachwalk Vacation Rentals brands.

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NWI Development Group recently acquired the 103-year-old Masonic Temple at 6th and Pine Streets in downtown Michigan City, which it may turn into a boutique hotel.

"I originally called my company UpperCross Development Group," Harte said. "But as in this part of my career, I started doing more and more development in Northwest Indiana and Southwest Michigan. It became more appropriate to call it NWI Development Group."

The company first started in Northwest Indiana after buying the Beachwalk Vacation Rentals, a resort community steps away from the Lake Michigan beach in Michigan City, out of bankruptcy. Demand was strong and only became stronger after the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore was elevated to the Indiana Dunes National Park in 2019.

Harte and his wife Sharon Harte began to add rental properties throughout the South Shore, offering turnkey management for people looking to rent out their second and summer homes to generate more passive income.

"I'm a prolific developer," he said. "I was doing my first project in New Buffalo by the Stray Dog and as I was driving from the western suburbs, I saw Beachwalk was in bankruptcy and that it was a real opportunity."

He believes Michigan City can be the next New Buffalo with 20 million people living within 150 miles, making it a convenient summer beach getaway.

"You don't have to fly to Florida or Myrtle Beach," he said. "You can drive to a beach nearby. COVID really fueled the vacation rental business rental business here. You don't have to fly to an island in Hawaii to go to a beach. You can watch the sunset drop over the water here. It's a special thing."

Visitation to the Indiana Dunes jumped by 50% since the National Park designation. Around 3 million people now visit the Indiana Dunes National Park a year.

"There's a need for quality lodging across the board," he said.

He went on to pursue his passion for historic buildings, such as by turning the nine-story former Bank Calumet headquarters at 5231 Hohman into 100 modern apartments by a new South Shore Line Station. He and other partners have invested \$30 million to save the century-old building, the tallest in Hammond, and adaptively reuse it.

He turned a 154-year-old brewery building where a pre-Prohibition brewery founded by a German immigrant stored barrels in Michigan City's Elston Grove Historic District into a 6,000-square-foot special events space where many happy couples have since wed. He revived the former midcentury modern publishing house in Beverly Shores that was founded Michigan City News-Dispatch reporter and author Neil Ruzic and his wife Carol Ruzic, a town councilwoman and town historian. It put out magazines such as Industrial Research and Oceanography before sitting vacant for decades before the NWI Development Group resurrected it, bringing in a bevy of new tenants.

Now he's turning his eyes to the historic Masonic Temple that was built 1922 and was most recently a halfway house serving recently released convicts from the Indiana State Prison, which is moving from Michigan City to Westville. He's initially planning to rent it out as an office but envisions the potential it has to be to a unique boutique hotel for visitors to the nearby Indiana Dunes.

"I have an affinity for historic buildings," he said.

Harte believes there's also a strong business case for repurposing the architectural gem.

"There's so much momentum in Northwest Indiana right now," he said. "You're seeing all these different projects, with other developers as well."

NWI Business Ins and Outs: Buona Beef, Great Harvest Bread Co., gluten-free bakery opening; bowling alley closed