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Multi-million upgrade for southern 'flagship'

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Tribune Business Editor

AN ECO-FRIENDLY boutique resort operator yesterday said it was aiming to invest between \$3-\$4 million, spread over two phases, in establishing a "flagship presence at the front door to the southern Bahamas" through taking over a Rum Cay property.

Unveiling the agreement to brand, and ultimately take management control of Sumner Point Marina and Villas, Mark Ellert, president of Guy Harvey Outpost Resorts, told Tribune Business that the company aimed to take its second Bahamian property "to the next level" by "taking a lemon and making it into lemonade".

Fresh from its acquisition and re-opening of the revamped Bimini Big Game Resort, Mr Ellert said Guy Harvey would look to grow Sumner Point slowly and organically, and in proportion to Rum Cay's size - the island has roughly 60 permanent residents.

Telling Tribune Business that Guy Harvey's controlled expansion plans might ultimately create up to 20 additional full-time jobs, Mr Ellert said the company had been attracted by Sumner Point's strategic location on the north-south boating routes through the Bahamas and into the Caribbean, and its proximity to key scientific research sites.

"We reminded our partners that the threshold at the outset, when Guy Harvey started, was that 30 degrees north and south of the equator there's loads of real estate in remote locations," Mr Ellert explained. "We found one, and know there's hundreds of islands in the Bahamas that fit this thesis."

Guy Harvey had been eyeing Rum Cay "for a number of years", he added, going back to 2006 when Rock Resorts was looking at branding Montana Holdings' proposed Rum Cay Resort Marina.

Tracing the origins of discussions with Sumner Point's current owner, Bobby Little and his family, Mr Ellert said Montana Holdings and its principal, John Mittens, had itself previously signed an agreement to manage the property with an option to purchase.

Montana Holdings had taken over management responsibility for Sumner Point while issues relating to land title and regulatory approvals, essential to concluding its purchase, were dealt with. Then the global recession intervened, which ultimately led to a dispute between Mr Little and Montana Holdings.

The outcome of that, Mr Ellert said, saw Mr Little regain control and re-open Sumner Point - a process that took two years, with Montana Holdings leaving the picture. Guy Harvey first held discussions with Mr Little "when on the cusp of these developments", and the latter eventually "circled back around" to him.

"From our standpoint it's an opportunity to put our flag in the southern Bahamas, which we consider the gateway in and out of the Bahamas" Mr Ellert told Tribune Business.

"We're excited about the opportunity to have that presence at the front door to the southern Bahamas as boaters will be working their south. This is the principal jumping off point, because between here and Providenciales it's open water. We're trying to take what Sumner Point has always been and take it to the next level."

Together with the likes of San Salvador and Cat Island's Hawk's Nest, Mr Ellert said Sumner Point was a major "transit point" for boaters from south Florida passing through the Bahamas on their way into the Caribbean.

"They have to go right past Rum. It's the last chance saloon," he added. And for boaters coming north, Sumner Point was the first major point of entry into the Bahamas, especially given that about 200 miles of sea separated it from the Turks & Caicos.

Explaining the phased approach Guy Harvey was taking with its second Bahamian resort property, Mr Ellert said it had entered into a license agreement, whereby Mr Little - for the moment - will continue to manage Sumner Point "under the aegis of the brand standards".

Guy Harvey, meanwhile, is applying to the Government for itself to take over management of the resort and its 28-slip marina, a process it hopes to complete by the middle of 2012.

Outlining the planned first phase upgrades, Mr Ellert said Guy Harvey planned to install additional piers to provide 2,000 linear feet of dock space. Decking will be rebuilt and slips extended to accommodate larger boats, the company undertaking "a reconfiguration of the whole" facility.

Sumner Point's five rental cottages, consisting of four beachfront units able to accommodate six persons, and a two-bedroom beachfront house, will be renovated, as will the resort's restaurant.

"Our goal is come Memorial day 2012, which is the start of the US boating season, we will be off to the races," Mr Ellert told Tribune Business. "At the end of summer we will start work on phase two, which is a bit more ambitious. That, hopefully, will be completed by Memorial Day 2013.

"Our phase one is \$1 million or so, and phase two a couple of million at best, \$2-\$3 million. Management is not that complicated. It's a very small property. The staff there is a core staff of probably about 10-15, depending on who you count as full-time or part-time. We're definitely one of the main employers on the island."

Mr Ellert said the phase two expansion consists of adding eight new accommodation units around a new pool complex adjacent to the existing restaurant, along with an upgraded marina and new pool room.

"We're going to create a research field station, and add an area for spot treatment," he added. "That will, in effect, double the size of the existing core." A retail area and artist's village are also planned.

Mr Ellert told Tribune Business that Guy Harvey's longer-term goal was to partner with property owners near Sumner Point, with the aim of getting their cottages and villas into a managed rental programme.

Adding those existing properties to Sumner Point's existing accommodation, he said, would provide enough beds for 40-50 people.

And, just as important, given Guy Harvey's environmentally friendly philosophy, which involves a major focus on ecological research, is Rum Cay's proximity to key scientific locations.


Apart from "fantastic fishing and diving", Mr Ellert said: "It's all about finding a scientific perspective for a destination. The Bahamas has lots of remote island destinations. The appeal of Rum Cay is the proximity to Conception Island, and to do some real time research in shark and coral preservation."

He indicated that the Guy Harvey Research Institute was looking to partner with Novasoutheastern University, and its School of Oceanography and Coral Reef Institute, in its research efforts.

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