

Hotel hopes to hire locals

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NEW BRUNSWICK — While workers continued to construct the interior of The Heldrich hotel and conference center yesterday, city leaders and the hotel's management company met across the street to announce a hiring initiative designed to fill the building with local employees.

"This is an opportunity to attract folks with local knowledge, local pride and local personality," said Michael Taylor, general manager for The Heldrich.

Taylor works for Benchmark Hospitality International, the Texas-based management firm that will run The Heldrich and hopes to hire 250 people before and soon after opening in March.

The Heldrich, constructed by New Brunswick Development Corp. on the corner of New Street, George Street and Livingston Avenue, will feature a 248-room hotel with 14 suites, 48 condominium units, 24 conference rooms, ballroom seating for 500 people, 50,000 square feet of conference space, a restaurant and bar, a health club and spa, and Rutgers University's John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development.

Available jobs include room attendants, reservation agents, security personnel, chefs, stewards, restaurant managers, concierges, conference floor managers, technicians, sales people, accountants, cashiers, engineers, and human resources personnel.

Benchmark said it will give preference to New Brunswick residents when making hiring decisions, aided by the hiring program announced yesterday.

"I'd like to see the majority of employees being local," Taylor said. "Like any business, we need to identify the right people. I'm sure they are here in New Brunswick."

In partnership with the city, Devco, and social services organization New Brunswick Tomorrow, Benchmark will invite people interested in applying for jobs to register at the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development's One-Stop Career Center on Jersey Avenue in November.

One-Stop counselors will prescreen candidates for qualifications and either pass their applications on to Benchmark or refer them for skills training at One-Stop or the New Brunswick Public Schools Adult Learning Center's Hospitality Program, sponsored by New Brunswick Tomorrow.

In addition, Elijah's Promise Culinary Arts Program will refer New Brunswick graduates of its 17-week training program to Benchmark.

Benchmark hopes to begin accepting applications and conducting interviews in early January and February 2007 prior to opening in March. Mayor James Cahill called The Heldrich "another step forward in our three-decade journey to revitalize our city."

"Job creation is one of the most far-reaching and significant aspects of redevelopment," he said.

"If you live in New Brunswick and you want a job, want a better job or want a job closer to home, the New Brunswick Heldrich Job Initiative is ready, willing and able to help you," Cahill said.

George Berry, a social services advocate, said he wanted to speak with Benchmark representatives about their policies toward people with criminal records.

"A lot of times people have the qualities and skills but because they are ex-offenders they are overlooked," Berry said. "If they can't find a job, that's discouraging and you go back and do what you know best."

Eileen Santoli, Benchmark's vice president of human resources, said the company asks applicants if they have been convicted and conducts a background check.

"But we look at it on an individual basis," Santoli said of someone's criminal history. "We look at the individual, the crime, the time, the responsibilities of the job. It's going to be a case-by-case basis."

Leo Graham, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church on George Street, praised the program.

"I think it will really strengthen the city," Graham said. "Really bring it together."

Graham said he will speak to his congregation about the opportunity at The Heldrich and encourage them to take advantage of it.

"A lot of them have jobs, but jobs without benefits for just above minimum wage," Graham said. "This could help fill the hole a little."