

Planning the Ritz resort

by Dawn Gilbertson - Jan. 3, 2010 12:00 AM

The Arizona Republic

The developers behind the new Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain had a different chain and a bigger resort in mind when they started plotting their first Tucson hotel venture in the late 1990s.

Cottonwood Properties of Tucson and Scottsdale-based Greenbrier Southwest Corp. were planning a 500-room Hyatt hotel in the Dove Mountain master-planned community northwest of Tucson.

The hotel was designed and the developers received a verbal commitment for the financing on Sept. 10, 2001.

The world changed the next day, of course, after the terrorist attacks on the East Coast. Travel and tourism was grounded. The idea for the Hyatt was shelved.

Greenbrier Southwest's Kathryn "Casey" and Tim Bolinger, who helped develop the Kierland master-planned community on the Phoenix-Scottsdale border under the Woodbine Southwest banner, turned their attention during the downturn to a significantly smaller project.

In late 2000, the Bolingers had purchased 150 acres of homestead property called Aspen Meadow Ranch in the White Mountains with their friends and Kierland partners Gary and Jeanne Herberger. The goal: develop an intimate, luxury lodge that they would seek out as travelers.

They opened Hidden Meadow Ranch in Greer in September 2002. It has 12 luxury cabins, each 900 square feet. The base room rate is \$500 a night including meals.

The developers revisited the Tucson project a couple of years later.

The Hyatt was out and the Ritz, which had earlier plans for a Tucson hotel in a different location, was in.

"All of a sudden this brand was available," Casey Bolinger said.

The Bolingers say their experience at Hidden Meadow proved invaluable in the development of the Ritz.

"I think it's made us better hotel operators," Casey Bolinger said. "It's made us more thoughtful to details."

At a glance

Key 2009 Tucson hotel statistics through October:

Occupancy: 54.4 percent, down 13.9 percent.

Average daily rate: \$91.55, down 10.9 percent.

Revenue per available room: \$49.77, down 23.3 percent.

Source: Smith Travel Research

That's why guests at the new Ritz-Carlton Dove Mountain will find, for example, the faucets off to the side in the large soaking tub in the in-room bathrooms.

"You've got a tub for two, you'd better make it work for two," Casey Bolinger said.

The Bolingers say Greenbrier Southwest isn't done on the hotel front, with interest in building or redeveloping other hotels. Tim Bolinger said, "We've always found our most successful projects during economic duress."

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/business/articles/2010/01/03/20100103biz-insider0103gilbertson.html>