

Inn plans transformational expansion adding buildings, spa

Moving beyond renowned cuisine to create luxury destination



RENDERING OF PROPOSED INN AT LITTLE WASHINGTON EXPANSION

MAJOR CHANGES

- 1 Spa and swimming pool
- 2 Expanded entrance
- 3 More rooms, buildings along Gay Street

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BY TIM CARRINGTON
For Foothills Forum

The Inn at Little Washington, soon to celebrate its 45th birthday, has unveiled a bold expansion plan that pushes the county's largest private enterprise into new territory, and presents

the Town of Washington with significant changes in its streetscape and ambiance.

A detailed design by Washington D.C.-based Franck & Lohsen Architects envisions 10 more guest rooms spread across various buildings, a spa with a

pool, new outside dining areas, a reception building for guests, a carriage house with a "Juliet balcony," plus a wine cellar and tasting hall. One existing building would be moved whole-

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sale to a new location while the others would be connected by colonnaded walkways. The buildings, old and new, would enclose a sizable courtyard with a central fountain, plantings and areas for large events, relaxing or eating.

“The current plan has been forty-five years in the making,” said Patrick O’Connell, the Inn’s proprietor chef. “For me, it feels like the completion of a fascinating puzzle.”

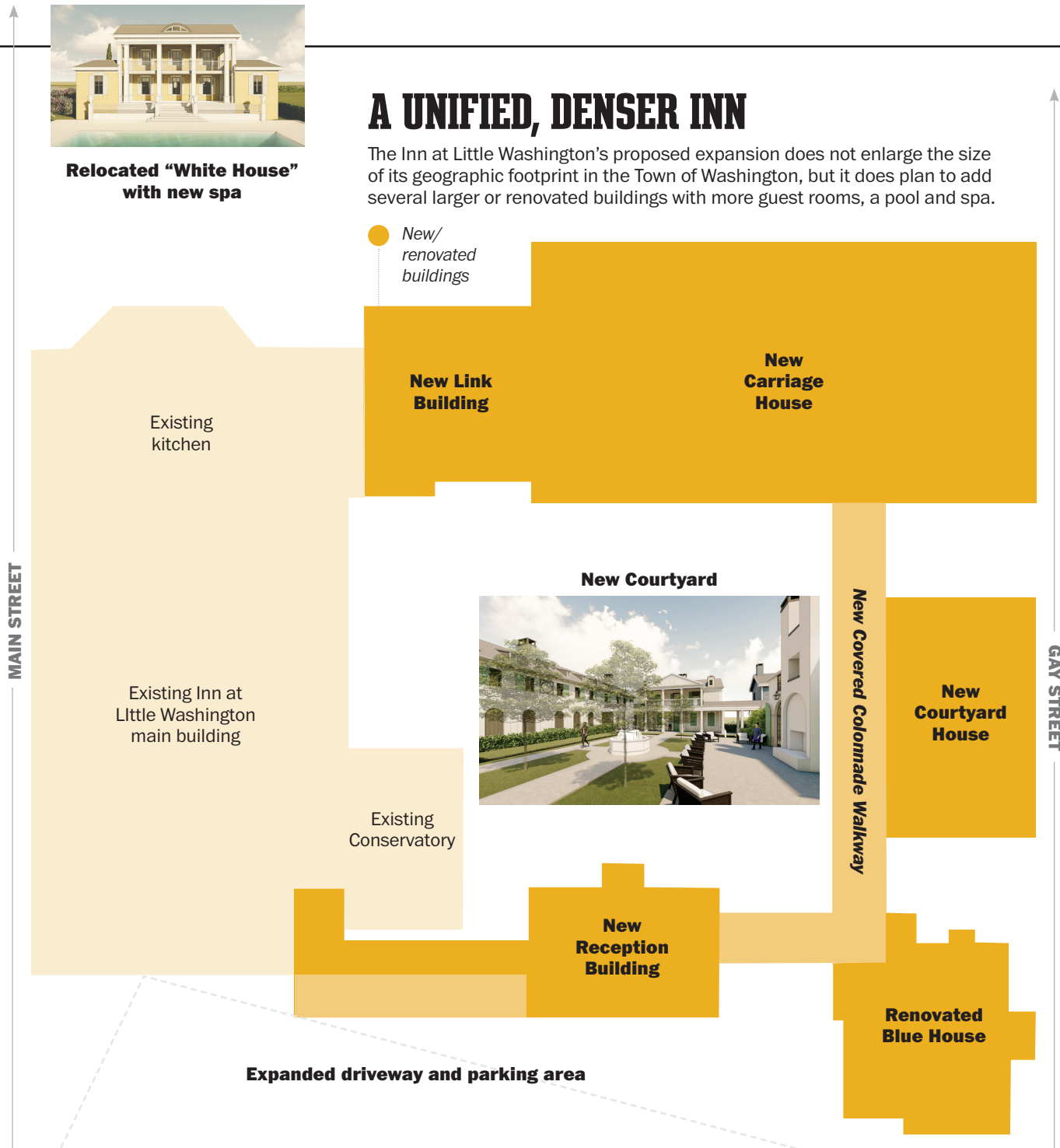
Washington Mayor Joe Whited, eager to present the town as business-friendly, welcomed the proposed transformation. “I’m encouraged they’re making an additional investment in Little Washington,” he said, adding that he supports a thorough review to ensure compliance with ordinances governing new construction. That process begins on Monday (May 15) when Washington’s Architectural Review Board begins scrutinizing the plans.

The architectural drawings emphasize new and much-altered buildings and fresh accents, but O’Connell insists that “when complete, the compound will look as if it has always been here.” The concept transforms a patchwork campus of renovated buildings into a coherent whole where affluent guests might step back from worldly pressures. And beyond the architectural details, the expansion represents a ratcheting-up of the O’Connell vision, solidifying three already evident trends if it comes to fruition:

► **A new business model:** The revisions would move the Inn decisively past its founding Cinderella legend of a grimy gas station mutating into a globally renowned restaurant. What’s emerging now is a diversified hospitality enterprise that goes beyond exquisite meals. O’Connell hopes to keep guests in \$1,000-a-night rooms for two or three days by offering the healthy indulgence of a spa, plus multiple spaces where guests can relax and restore. The proposed reception building underscores the importance of overnight guests, aiming to establish Washington as a rejuvenating destination rather than just a memorable dinner.

► **A new townscape:** The Inn’s current patchwork campus of reimagined buildings would be knit together into a more connected whole. Existing buildings would be linked, with three major new structures joining them to frame a courtyard at the center of the establishment. The compound would be more coherent, but also more dense, surrounded by the town’s eclectic mix of residential, commercial and public buildings. By staying within its existing footprint, the Inn hopes to avoid the familiar complaint that it is gobbling up the town. Still, it was last year’s purchase of the building that once housed Middle Street Gallery and the now-shuttered Antiques at Middle Street for \$1 million that enabled the consolidation.

► **A new financial base:** Dining and guest room revenues would surge, pushing up the town’s receipt of meals and lodging taxes. These now exceed \$600,000 a year, and town officials figure the expansion will bring in about \$250,000 more. The added rooms also would generate new hook-up and us-



RENDERINGS FROM INN AT LITTLE WASHINGTON FILING/FRANCK & LOHSEN ARCHITECTS

A UNIFIED, DENSER INN

The Inn at Little Washington’s proposed expansion does not enlarge the size of its geographic footprint in the Town of Washington, but it does plan to add several larger or renovated buildings with more guest rooms, a pool and spa.

age fees to support the town’s costly water and sewer system. (A privately held enterprise, the Inn at Little Washington closely guards financial details of its operations, other than to note that its revenues would rise and recycle in the county.)

Management change

The expansion program coincides with a significant change in management for the Inn. As O’Connell worked on finishing touches with the archi-

itects, Robert Fasce, the general manager, left for a new job as chief operating officer of the Rolling Rock Club in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. The move ended what many saw as an inspired partnership between a visionary chef and a get-it-done manager, who could translate inspirations into construction contracts, all the while managing a staff of about 250.

Apparently taking the shift in stride, O’Connell noted that general managers tend to move to new jobs, and quickly elevated 37-year-old Andrew Wright to

director of operations from director of culinary operations. Wright has been with the Inn for 12 years, among other things establishing a system of checklists to help cooks hone their skills — all the while aiming to avoid the harshly perfectionist atmosphere of many top-end restaurants.

“Andrew played an instrumental role in the construction and development of Patty O’s,” O’Connell said. “He came up through our kitchen in much the same way Bob did.” Another emerging talent is Fasce’s son Christopher, ➔

The future corner of Warren Avenue and Gay Street



▶ TO WATCH
an animation of the Inn's expansion, scan the code to the left or go to **rappnews.link/ous**



Current corner of Warren and Gay



A future depiction of Gay Street. Washington's Town Hall would be farther to the right of this rendering.

➔ who has held various key jobs managing the flow of guests and meals at both Patty O's and the Inn. Meanwhile, an international search firm is scanning for executive talent that might handle some of the functions for which the elder Fasce was responsible.

While O'Connell has challenged and inspired those he calls the "culinarians," the 77-year-old founder and proprietor chef remains the driver of change at the enterprise, particularly its boldest-ever expansion. The move flows from a business philosophy more often associated with titans of industry than artistic chefs. "A business such as ours is either growing or dying," O'Connell declared last year. "Standing still is not an option."

But a clumsy, ill-designed expansion is not an option either. In a telling comment within a documentary about the Inn, O'Connell, about to sample a morsel from an aspiring sous-chef, stated, "It's either art or it's garbage."

The same standard is applied to paint colors and upholstery at the Inn, and doubtless to the structural designs from Franck & Lohsen. Initial reactions have been positive. Former Washington Mayor John Fox Sullivan said he found the scope of the proposed transformation "jaw-dropping," but added that he considers the proposed structures to be "lovely."

Review and scrutiny

On Monday, May 15, Washington's Architectural Review Board launches the review process that will determine how and whether the plan will go forward. The ARB will ensure the design complies with height and setback requirements, and more broadly whether the new configuration is compatible

with the town and its streets. Zoning officials will review the plan, though town officials point out that the property is already zoned for the uses envisioned in the expansion.

Following the ARB review, and possible architectural adjustments, Washington's Planning Commission will study a site plan. Absent any snarls or complexities, the town Council will not be required to undertake a separate review. The Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors has no role in the process. However, ARB and Planning Commission meetings will be open to the public, and citizens outside the town will be invited to share their reactions, some of which are likely to be critical of the scope of the change, the sense of an enclosed campus for the Inn, or the

INN PROPRIETOR CHEF PATRICK O'CONNELL:

"The current plan has been forty-five years in the making. For me, it feels like the completion of a fascinating puzzle."

threat of added traffic. Whited guesses the process will be wrapped up in a month or two.

Hampton Supervisor Keir Whitson, whose district includes the town of Washington, underscored the importance of the Inn's economic contribu-

tions to the town and the county. "The Inn is the county's largest employer, by far," he said, "and I know many old-time, local people who have worked there, or still work there, and some for many years." He added that he has real concern about the traffic congestion as the Inn's operations expand, and called for careful analysis of where cars and trucks will travel and park.

Movable White House

Perhaps the plan's most startling mutation involves the building known as "The White House." Located near the Inn kitchen, the structure now provides offices for O'Connell and the senior staff, as well as space for kitchen tools and general storage. The expansion calls for moving the building to a new location, visually aligned to the Claiborne House on Gay Street. There, the White House would be expanded and turned into the Inn at Little Washington Spa, replete with cold and hot tubs, "treatment rooms," sauna and steam rooms, a ground-level pool made possible by recent changes to town law, and terraces for outdoor lounging.

The shape-shifting changes won't interrupt the flow of guests and food at the Inn and Patty O's. "Because there is a party wall separating the Inn from the newly acquired property, many guests will not be aware anything is taking place on the other side of it," O'Connell said.

As other septuagenarians ease up or dip into exercises of life-review, O'Connell evinces only pleasure in the present and a fascination with what comes next. "We have fun, eat well and get along, united by a common purpose — making people happy," he said. "The next few years may be some of the most interesting we've ever experienced."



FILE PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

Robert Fasce, who recently departed as the Inn at Little Washington's general manager, with chef proprietor Patrick O'Connell last spring.

Inn's expansion plan clears Town's architectural board

Further reviews remain

BY TIM CARRINGTON
For Foothills Forum

Washington's Architectural Review Board unanimously endorsed the sweeping expansion design advanced by the town's chef and innkeeper, Patrick O'Connell, after a succession of residents said they trusted that the new and revised buildings wouldn't overwhelm the quiet streetscape they consider home.

The ARB "certification of appropriateness" paves the way for a detailed site plan, a review by the Town Planning Commission, and the application for a building permit from the Rappahannock County Building Office. Each involves new scrutiny and O'Connell and his team are steeling themselves for months of detailed discussions on traffic flows, water and sewer hookups, electricity demand, noise and light pollution.

There may be continued attention around the building that formerly housed the Middle Street Gallery and Antiques at Middle Street. O'Connell said the structure, bought by the Inn last year in a \$1 million acquisition, has suffered water damage and rot, and that it lacks the historic pedigree that requires care and restoration. Indeed the Inn has obtained a permit to "remove it," though O'Connell said if the building, or part of it, turns out to carry historical importance, as some think it does, the Inn will rethink that plan.

But the ARB endorsement, which followed a tour of the compound, and an unexpectedly peaceful meeting, suggests that the county's feverish change-versus-continuity wars are losing some of their vitriol. Visibly relieved by the outcome and the generally supportive exchanges, O'Connell remarked that "now it's pretty clear that it's a renaissance" more than a threat, and that citizens accept that the town's success is tied to that of its largest enterprise.

O'Connell's peaceful sail through the ARB wasn't an accident. Three critical messages – reinforced throughout the evening – and in informal discussions after the bold blueprint emerged last week – reassured what might have been a fretful community.

► **The big plans aren't as big as they look.** There is a new reception building for guests, a spa with a swimming pool, a courtyard house with new rooms, and a carriage house with more new rooms plus a wine cellar. Plus there are linking structures, a new courtyard and colonnaded walkways. However, all of the new buildings and enhancements fall within the Inn's existing footprint, with no additional real estate. And none of the new structures will reach the height of the Inn itself, or adjacent Washington Town Hall. The 10 new rooms, it was noted repeatedly, will bring at most 20 new guests at a time, arriving in 10 cars that would be whisked off to valet parking spots away from Washington's principal streets.

► **Set aside the blueprints, walk the streets.** The drawings by Washington D.C.-based Franck & Lohsen Architects showed only the newly configured Inn. Lacking a context for the new structures, neighbors worried that the town would seem foreign, even unrecognizable. A video seemed to carry viewers even further from the place they knew and loved. O'Connell organized a tour of current buildings and gardens an

hour before the scheduled ARB meeting, pointing out where each new building would begin and where it would stop. In a presentation at the ARB meeting that followed, architect Michael Franck departed from his own blueprint to point up the green spaces between buildings. He also predicted landscaping touches and design flourishes to soften what some found to be a "fortress-like" solidity in the new plan. A number of town residents said that the explanations provided on the tour, and during the ARB meeting, left them reassured.

► **Track records, and before and after images.** Once perceived as an outrageous experiment, the Inn at Little Washington, at 45, is an unquestioned success story that has transformed the town and the county. In the Town Hall, where the ARB session unfolded, O'Connell arrayed before and after photographs on easels, featuring the oil-splotted gas station that became the Inn, along with various neglected and dilapidated structures the Inn refurbished and incorporated into its campus. "Each of these projects was opposed at the time," he said just before the discussion of the expansion plan. "One even had a stop-order placed on it by the ARB. Each of them seemed a threat to the community when it was proposed. And when it was finished, people liked it."

A SMALL TOWN, A BIG PROJECT

Citizen discomfort mostly focused on the scope of the project. Though falling within the Inn's current footprint, the new configuration unifies the buildings, knitting a scattered campus into a coherent whole around a rectangular courtyard. Long-time Washington resident Judy DeSarno said that while "it will be beautiful and exquisite, I'm worried.. Something this size in a place this small."

Gary Aichele, who recently moved back to the town with his wife Wendy, voiced a similar unease: "It's a small town, and it's a big project. How do we

decide whether this addition overwhelms?" But like most others who spoke up, he ended up assured. "It's a natural expansion and I think it's about right, frankly," he concluded.

George Eatman, a respected observer and author on art and architecture, and a neighbor of the Inn, stated that the planned reconfiguration and expansion "makes a beautiful addition to the town."

Former Mayor John Fox Sullivan said the Inn's interests are aligned with those of the town residents. "Nobody cares more about this town than Patrick O'Connell," he said. "Yes, he's in business and, yes, he wants to make money. But he wants less traffic, not more. He wants less trucks, so he sends them down Route 211. He doesn't want a Disneyland. That would destroy his business and that would be stupid."

And although tensions between the town and the county bubble up continuously, county residents also benefit from the Inn's success. Although the Inn's gusher of meals and lodging taxes bypasses the county and finances much of the town's budget, sales taxes flow to the county. Keir Whitson, County Supervisor for Hampton district, which includes Washington, estimates that a typical county resident has as much as \$200 more in the bank each year because the sales taxes from the Inn obviate the need for an unpopular jump in real estate taxes.



BY TIM CARRINGTON

Inn at Little Washington proprietor Patrick O'Connell explains his expansion plans to interested neighbors on Monday.

New general manager's to do list: transform Inn into destination resort spa

BY TIM CARRINGTON
For Foothills Forum

Ed Gannon, The Inn at Little Washington's new general manager, is taking on the storied enterprise's most ambitious reinvention to date: transforming a restaurant and inn into a small resort that promises visitors not just rest, but restoration.

The plans the Inn unveiled last May call for three overlapping expansions: more guests, more that they can do and more days they'll spend in Little Washington. They will eat well and sleep deeply, but also visit treatment rooms in a fully-equipped spa on Gay Street, absorb centuries of wine culture in a cellar and tasting room, swim in the pool, stroll along meticulously landscaped paths and shop in the Inn's shops.

Gannon, 58, knows all about wine and wellness, and the ways well-heeled travelers tend to use their leisure time. From 2021 till his move to The Inn at Little Washington, he's been the general manager of Auberge Resorts' newly opened Stanly Ranch, a 700-acre Napa Valley resort described by Forbes Magazine as a "next-generation well-being destination."

Patrick O'Connell, the Inn's proprietor chef, pored over stacks of candidate credentials from around the world after his former general manager Robert Fasce departed in the spring to become chief operating officer at the Rolling Rock Club in Pennsylvania. O'Connell said he chose Gannon because "he gained extensive knowledge in creating and managing destination spas and new construction projects" — which precisely describes what the inn currently needs its new manager to do.

The Inn's expansion agenda is daunting: a pool, treatment rooms, a wine cellar, 10 new guest rooms, a reception hall and courtyard. An existing building will get moved to a new location. Regulatory hurdles, public hearings, supply-chain challenges, labor availability will compete for the general manager's attention. Meanwhile, the meals that earned the inn its three Michelin stars must continue to flow from kitchen to table, and staff must be recruited, trained and encouraged to embrace the inn's distinct ethos, mixing perfectionism with a touch of whimsy.

"I'll be leaning into the experience of running spas," Gannon said. Before

overseeing the completion and opening of Stanly Ranch, he managed Four Seasons' resorts in Jackson Hole, Wyo., and the Caribbean island of Nevis, and worked in senior management at Rosewood Hotels.

Auberge Resorts employs language that resonates with phrases O'Connell uses to explain the enterprise he created from a gas station and a mix of mostly neglected buildings in Little Washington. More than meals and rooms, the Inn aims to offer experiences people can't forget, while Auberge Resorts promises "curated experiences" in 31 hotels and spas across the United States, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and Europe.

Auberge doesn't impose a brand on the hotels and spas it manages, but it infuses a shared philosophy, with each resort offering a special geography and a

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distinct personality that fits the locale. The Auberge website splashes up images of both adventurous recreation and deep serenity at its various locations. The formula seems to be working. Auberge has five new resorts on the way — in Italy, South Carolina, San Francisco, Florida and Texas.

Making the Inn a "well-being destination" like the ones in the Auberge empire will be Gannon's new focus, though the Little Washington campus is far smaller than the typical Auberge resort, with more sedate forms of recreation than destinations bordering oceans or ski slopes.

INN INSPIRED HIM 30 YEARS AGO

Gannon absorbed something of the inn's personality at the start of his long career in hospitality. Three decades back, starting work as an executive chef in Kennebunkport, Maine, Gannon took on a "stage," (pronounced as a French word), or an immersion learning exercise, at The Inn at Little Washing-



COURTESY INN AT LITTLE WASHINGTON

Prior to coming to Little Washington, new Inn general manager Ed Gannon helped launch a 700-acre resort in California's Napa Valley.

ton. The experience was formative.

"This was an inspiration for my whole career," Gannon said. He explained that most large hospitality businesses aim to be cost effective in delivering good service, while at the inn, cost effectiveness wasn't mentioned. The goal of "creating an excellent experience" was the mantra.

During his "stage," Gannon worked with various teams in the kitchen and came to understand the workflow and the understanding that meals were part nourishment, part art. He remembered training sessions where aspiring waitstaff parried questions about everything from sauces to wall hangings. Answers needed to be graceful and accurate.

O'Connell and Gannon probably crossed paths in the intervening years, but neither remembers the specifics of where. However, phone contacts began last June and continued through July. A subsequent visit to Little Washington confirmed Gannon's keen interest in the job, and after he returned to California, the Inn put together the terms of an offer. A privately-held enterprise, the Inn never shares financial details about income, expenses, debt and executive contracts.

Recognizing that the Inn is Rappahannock County's largest private enterprise, and is knit into the life of a town that shares its Little Washington identity, Gannon is making the rounds to meet neighbors and influencers, including the rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Elizabeth Keeler. (The church is essentially surrounded by Inn properties, with a shared parking lot, and has historically enjoyed friendly relations with the enterprise.)

Gannon and his wife, Michelle, looked for a home in Washington, but because offerings in the hamlet were limited, they bought a house in Warrenton.

REGULATORY HURDLES

Lessons in local geography and sociology will unfold as Gannon steers the

Inn through a succession of regulatory hurdles associated with the planned expansion. The Inn's plan has been deemed consistent with the town's Comprehensive Plan, and it falls within the existing zoning framework. Washington's Architectural Review Board has agreed that the designs revealed last May are harmonious with the town's present architecture and character. But the zoning ordinance requires a fully detailed site plan, addressing all aspects of site development. This is still in the works.

An array of outside agencies will review the plan: Rappahannock County authorities for building, fire and rescue, erosion and settlement control; the Virginia Department of Health, responsible for sewer and water features; the Virginia Department of Historic Resources; the Virginia Department of Transportation, which will scrutinize drainage issues; and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, which will study provisions for stormwater.

The town will review any easements, utility details and traffic impact. Citizens will be concerned about disruption and traffic during the construction phase, and a host of other details, including the risk that additional lighting will compromise the area's status as one of Virginia's prized dark-sky environments.

Building the new identity as a "well-being destination," while significant, doesn't represent a massive enlargement. The Inn's footprint remains unchanged under the plan, and Gannon points out that the 10 new rooms will bring about 20 new people to Washington at any one time.

"It's an incremental lift that hopefully all will feel," he said, pointing to more visitors to local galleries, shops and eateries, more tax revenue for the town, and to a lesser degree the county, and more fees for Washington's costly water and sewer system. A year from now, he added, "I'd like to be well settled into my role and a contributing member of the community."

Court hearing for Chester Brown continued

A Rappahannock County General District Court hearing for Washington resident Chester Brown was continued on Tuesday after Brown received a new

court-appointed attorney.

Brown will next appear in court on Oct. 17 at 9:30 a.m., where he is expected to enter a plea. He is now rep-

resented by Warrenton-based public defender Joe Pricone.

Brown, 62, was arraigned last month on three felony firearm charges. After search warrants were executed, Brown was arrested for

the theft of a firearm that belonged to 74-year-old Doris Critzer, who was killed in August. He has not been charged in connection with her death.

— Julia Shanahan