



New hotels on tap for Vilano

By Colleen Jones
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Local hotelier Farid Ashdji is behind two new hotel projects underway in Vilano Beach.

Ashdji and a partner have broken ground on a Hyatt and a Holiday Inn Express, both of which will be on Vilano Road not far from the Publix in the Vilano Beach Town Center, a streetscape of businesses offering retail, dining and lodging.

An official groundbreaking for both projects will be on Jan. 16 but work has already begun on both lots, with an anticipated opening of the Holiday Inn in December 2019 and the Hyatt by summer 2020, according to Ashdji who provided the Vilano Beach Main Street Association with an update on the plans at the group's Dec. 19 meeting.

The Hyatt will be three stories high, with 120 rooms, underground parking and a rooftop bar. It will also include an independently run restaurant as well as dedicated meeting space.

The Holiday Inn Express will also have three floors with a total of 50 rooms. There will be ground-floor space for additional retail and a coffee shop.

Ashdji first set his sights on opening a hotel in Vilano in 1990 when he purchased one of the two parcels currently being developed. In an interview with *The Record* on Wednesday, Ashdji said he sat too long on the plans and sold the property.

"And then I bought it back again," Ashdji said.

Ashdji said he originally intended to turn the property into an independent hotel but with input from his business partner decided upon brand-name franchises. In addition to owning and operating the Ponce St. Augustine Hotel on U.S. 1, Ashdji has developed several other local projects, including the Courtyard Marriott and Hilton Garden Inn in St. Augustine Beach.

Because of his experience, Ashdji said he knows the local market and believes the demand is there to support two more lodging options in Vilano Beach beyond the existing Hampton Inn and a handful of smaller motor lodges.

Richard Goldman, president and CEO of the St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra & The Beaches Visitors and Convention Bureau, agrees.

“Demand for hotel rooms in Vilano Beach is really good,” Goldman said. “They’re near enough to the beach to get beach proximity pricing. ... From what we’re seeing, they should do very well.”

Ashdji said, “Vilano Beach is probably one of the best-kept secrets in all of Florida. It’s surrounded by water, and these properties will be unique in their look and feel.”

The Hyatt will feature a “21st century Art Deco” design, while the Holiday Inn will have a “Florida vernacular” style.

“You will be able to tell the historical era in which they were built,” Ashdji said. “We can create something for St. Augustine that people will be able to look back at in the future.”

Both, Ashdji said, will cater to a “high-end” clientele.

Also on the horizon in Vilano Beach is a project to construct 50 luxury townhouses near the waterfront. The proposal has not yet been formally presented to St. Johns County officials for consideration.