

Veteran hotelier Jim Ridenour named G.M. of new 133-room Residence Inn on South Babcock Street in Melbourne, extended-stay property to open in January; Julie Braga is director of sales

By Ken Datzman

The Residence Inn by Marriott, the brand that pioneered the "extended-stay" business concept, will be opening in Melbourne in about 12 weeks or so. The new property is a welcome addition to the South Babcock Street corridor, an area that is undergoing a transformation with new construction.

Veteran hotelier Jim Ridenour has been named general manager of the 133-room Residence Inn that is under construction at the Florida Marketplace. The hotel is scheduled to open in early January.

For the past 15 years, Ridenour has been with Courtyard by Marriott in West Melbourne. He has served as its general manager since 1998. Under his leadership, the West Melbourne hotel has consistently won top awards in the large Courtyard network of properties. Ridenour himself has been very active in the business community, leading organizations and serving on numerous committees over the years.

"This was the right move for me," said Ridenour, a former U.S. Air Force pilot who flew 135 combat missions in Vietnam, arriving in Da Nang in 1966. "It allows me to refocus my efforts, because opening this hotel is a new challenge. It's a new product in a new market and we're excited to be a part of it."

Deborah Carr was recently named to fill Ridenour's position at Courtyard by Marriott on West New Haven Avenue. Julie Braga, who was the assistant general manager of Courtyard by Marriott in West Melbourne, has been hired as director of sales for the new Residence Inn, which is owned by a growing Miami hotel group. Ridenour and Braga are working out of an office in the Florida Marketplace while construction is ongoing.

Several years ago, redevelopment took hold of the Babcock Street corridor. The business community has supported the work that is uplifting the area. The Residence Inn continues that redevelopment theme, which has gained momentum over the past 24 months.

"Our property will blend nicely with the redevelopment that has been taking place in that area," said Ridenour, who is a graduate of Ball State University and Central Michigan University, where he earned a master's degree in personnel management. "That's why the City of Melbourne embraced the project. It brings something new to the redevelopment effort. The hotel really provides an anchor for the area, and more businesses can rally around it. When construction is completed and the landscape package is finished, the Residence Inn will complement the Florida Marketplace and the surrounding area."

Ridenour, who retired from the U.S. Air Force as a colonel and later went to work for Courtyard by Marriott in West Melbourne, said the Residence Inn will employ 35 people, including a sales manager. Located at 1400 S. Babcock St., the hotel plans to open Jan. 8, he said. "We'll probably have a grand opening in early March. We want to make sure everything is running smoothly and our service level has been established before we show off the hotel to the community."

The six-floor Residence Inn, with two elevators, will feature 98 studios, 25 one-bedroom suites, and 10 two-bedroom arrangements. The general contractor is WELBRO Building Corp. in Maitland. Sean Chung is the project engineer. Ridenour says the hotel will target guests "who stay five days or longer." The Residence Inn sales team will be calling on human resource directors, training directors, health-care personnel and other professionals who typically spend several days in a hotel when they travel. "We believe we are perfectly positioned in the marketplace with this extended-stay product."

The hotel is close to Melbourne International Airport, Holmes Regional Medical Center and other care providers, Florida Tech, Harris Corp., Northrop Grumman and DRS Technologies. The only other Residence Inn in Brevard County is in Cape Canaveral. Residence Inn is one of Marriott's strongest-performing brands. There are more than 500 of them across the nation.

Residence Inn defined the extended-stay lodging category in 1975 when it created the first residential-style hotels specially designed for long-term guests. Often available for the same price as a standard hotel room, Residence Inns offer large



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

The Residence Inn by Marriott, under construction at the Florida Marketplace in Melbourne, plan to open Jan. 8. Jim Ridenour, who ran the Courtyard by Marriott in West Melbourne for years, will lead the new Residence Inn team. Julie Braga is director of sales for Residence Inn. She, too, previously was with the Courtyard. The extended-stay hotel, owned by the Finvarb Group in Miami will employ 35 people.

suites with separate living and sleeping areas, and fully equipped kitchens.

Ridenour says his hotel will feature the "Gen7" suite, a new design that showcases contemporary décor and finishes that reflect the comforts and luxuries of a modern American home. Extended-stay guests around the nation who evaluated the design gave it high marks for being "stylish, sophisticated, distinctive and innovative." The suite features "zones" to meet the living needs of the extended-stay guest — cooking, dining, working, relaxing and sleeping.

Incorporating elements of a home, the suite has stainless-steel appliances and granite countertops in the kitchen; upgraded bedding that is softer and very luxurious; a comfortable and multi-functional living area, with recliner and ottoman; and a striking red chaise lounge that converts into a bed. Said Ridenour: "The whole concept is built around comfort. We want our guests to feel like they are at home."

The hotel will have a restaurant, serving mainly breakfast. "We will offer guests free breakfast every day of the week," he said. The facility will include a pool and lighted basketball court. The Residence Inn will contain an executive conference room, too. The hotel will host 10 social events a month for its guests. The functions will feature food and drink. "We are going to try to theme the social events." Every two weeks, the general manager will host a cookout for hotel guests. "And the G.M. does the cooking," he said.

The Residence Inn in Melbourne is owned by the Finvarb Group in South Florida. The principals of the group are Robert Finvarb and Richard Finvarb. "This is their seventh hotel," Ridenour said. Their portfolio includes a number of Marriott brands. Richard Finvarb, a general contractor, has been in the real-estate business in Florida for more than 30 years. The Finvarb Group has developed high-rise condominiums, multifamily apartment buildings, and single-family home communities.