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# Laishley retailer and restaurant quite the catch

Marina Park group boosts downtown growth with new locale

BY BARBARA BOXLEITNER Florida Weekly Correspondent



Laishley Crab House under construction.

Capt. Louie Desguin reserved his spot at Laishley Park Municipal Marina when he heard about plans for development at the waterside venue.

He's among the locals who joined the party early.

Now others are following suit, committing to filling the retail space in the ground floor of the Marina Park LLC building under construction. The top floor will feature the Laishley Crab House.

A Charlotte High School graduate, Mr. Desguin said he has operated Punta Gorda

River Boat Tours the past two years from a marina slip. "It's going to make downtown Punta Gorda a destination, which it hasn't really been since the mid-'70s when they built Fishermen's Village," Mr. Desguin said. "It's going to make the city back to the waterfront community it was."

Mr. Desguin was moved by the Marina Park contingent, whose partners include Chris Evans and Robbie Sifrit, graduates of Charlotte High and Port Charlotte High, respectively.

"These are local businessmen," Mr. Desguin said. "These are local kids that were born here and grew up here. They know what Punta Gorda needs to be. It's a very exciting time."

Construction is expected to be complete by Aug. 15, said Mr. Sifrit, a Realtor at RE/MAX Anchor Realty in Punta Gorda, though build-out might be done by October or November. "I think the location close to downtown makes it unique," he said. "It's kind of like everything is moving that way."

"It's another spot that you can access by boat," he said. "We don't have that many locations we can access by boat. It's just a perfect location."

The popularity of Laishley Park and its events attract many visitors. Mr. Sifrit and Elaine Brand, who lives in a Harbor Walk condominium next to the park, noted how many people frequent the grounds, especially the interactive fountain.

Mrs. Brand, 85, said she walks her pomeranian regularly in the park. She said people are at the fountain sometimes at 9 a.m., the hour when she was at the park during a recent morning.

Mr. Sifrit said an open-air market with fresh catch is planned for the pavilion near the parking lot by the park. He said he expects more commercial interest in the marina slips once the market gets established. "The boat slips have had high demand," he said.

The retail space has been listed on LoopNet for about three months, he said, and four retail spaces of about 850 square feet each remained available as of July 10. "It's built to suit," he said.

Those with signed leases include an art gallery, a real estate office, an attorney, a surfside/swimsuit shop, a boat club and a yacht club, all from the area, Mr. Sifrit said. The real estate office has the largest space at 2,200 square feet, he said, while the boat club has 400.

Most are expansions, he said, although the surfside/swimsuit shop is a startup. "We're very excited about the amount of people we've got," he said. "We're trying not to put two of anything in there. We want to keep it diverse."

And diverse is what the Laishley Crab House will be, according to those who have overseen construction of the latest addition to the restaurants and bars of Smuggler's

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The expanse -- the 15,000 square feet -- of the restaurant already has people talking. "Their biggest attraction is going to be the size and the water view, of course," Mrs. Brand said. "Some of my neighbors think it's a monstrosity because it's so huge, but you got to with the flow."

The exterior design is intended to match the architecture of the surrounding area, as city leaders want. Mr. Desguin said many communities have adopted the Mediterranean style, so he is pleased the building instead resembles other downtown structures.

The Laishley Crab House's interior is designed to give "that old shack feel," said Mr. Evans, Smuggler's Enterprises chief of operations. "The lumber is from the Tennessee mountains. It's all roughcut lumber."

Carter Alexander, the restaurant's general manager, said in an e-mail that the seating capacity for the main dining room, event/banquet room, main bar and deck together will be about 520. "We have 1928 Chevy pickup as the centerpiece for our bar on the outside deck," he said. "It is one of a kind and will be an attraction for everyone in southwest Florida."

Mr. Alexander brings extensive culinary experience, including years as an executive chef, to the eatery. "The menu is different from our other restaurants, but keeping with the same high quality ingredients and fresh food," he said. "This will be a larger menu than the other restaurants, as this is the largest restaurant that we will be operating. We have created a unique menu that specializes in fresh seafood and crabs. We also have a sushi bar. We are making all of our products daily from scratch to ensure freshness and the highest quality food available for our guests."

A menu posted on the restaurant's online site lists 13 selections for appetizers, seven for buckets of crab, six for crab cakes; 13 for seafood and six for steak and chicken. Sandwiches, salads and soups also are included in the mix.

Mrs. Brand said she and her husband, William Brand, eat out at least once a week and plan to try the restaurant once it's complete. "Everybody's got to check it out to see how good it is," she said.

Mr. Evans said 85 people have been hired to staff the restaurant. Mr. Alexander said it will ultimately employ about 100. †

**>>For retail information:**

Retail spots on the ground floor of the Marina Park project are available for \$18 to \$25 per square foot, according to Robbie Sifrit, Realtor at RE/MAX Anchor Realty in Punta Gorda. Parties interested in retail space should contact Marina Park partner Chris Evans.

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