

Restaurant, winter wonderland possible for a revitalized Casa Loma

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A café and restaurant, a destination for events from Winterlicious to Nuit Blanche and a winter wonderland are some of the ideas Liberty Entertainment Group CEO Nick Di Donato has for Casa Loma.

Toronto's executive committee unanimously approved a 20-year deal Wednesday for the management company to lease and operate the historic mansion.

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"We want to make it a venue that you can visit on multiple occasions," Mr. Di Donato said, adding he wants to see constantly changing events and exhibits to keep the attraction fresh.

"The current operation is a static exhibit of Henry Pellatt's furniture. Once you're there, there's no need to go back. There's no reason for Torontonians to go back."

Liberty Entertainment, a Toronto-based company, owns and operates properties across the city and in Miami. The company owns the Phoenix concert hall, Tattoo Rock Parlour and the Liberty Grand ballroom at Exhibition Place and produces events for their venues and other corporations such as TIFF and Toronto Fashion Week.

The proposal will now go before city council in November for final approval. If approved, Mr. Di Donato said the biggest changes, like renovations and carving out a restaurant in part of the Edwardian manor, wouldn't come for a year or two. But the site will remain open, and smaller upgrades could pop up as soon as this winter.

"During the wintertime, currently there's nothing going on in the gardens. We want to look at a winter wonderland. You can imagine the ice sculptures," Mr. Di Donato said.

The deal has been a long time coming, with city council unsure about how to proceed with managing the property after ending a long-time agreement with the Kiwanis Club more than two years ago. In the meantime, the attraction has been maintained by a city services corporation.

Trelawny Howell, a local activist who has petitioned the city for years to find a new operator for Casa Loma, spoke in favour of the deal. She said she's pleased executive approved it, but questioned why the process took as long as it did.

"I've been advocating for this since 2007. They weren't going with their own city reports because of political agendas and inside dealings," she said. "This is amazing, but why did it take so long?"

The vast property was originally seized by the city in 1924 from owner Sir Henry Pellatt for unpaid taxes. The Kiwanis Club operated the venue for years before tensions over the deteriorating castle prompted the city to end its contract with the charity group.

Though exact figures of the deal were confidential, Wednesday's report noted Liberty Entertainment Group agrees to "a significant capital investment in the interior of the Main House," while paying a base rent "far greater" than the city corporation.

Executive committee councillors were unanimous in their support for the deal, with many speaking about their eagerness to see the 98-room mansion revitalized.

“We’re going to be astounded at how well this is going to work out for the city,” said Deputy Mayor Norm Kelly during the meeting.

Mr. Di Dinato – who also sits on the Toronto Transit Commission – said the company’s experience and connections in the city will make it easy to revitalize the aging castle.

“During Fashion Week or during Winterlicious and all those city engagements we want to participate in and bring the people of Toronto to the facility,” he said. “It’s a marvellous facility and we want to make sure it’s open to Torontonians more so than anything else.”

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