

CENTRE DAILY TIMES

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‘A 5-star experience’: New owner talks big plans for reopening iconic Nittany Lion Inn

BY JOSH MOYER

JUNE 03, 2023 5:00 AM



The Nittany Lion Inn is expected to reopen in August 2024 after significant renovations. ABBY DREY *Centre Daily Times*, file



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STATE COLLEGE

Come August 2024, if the vision of Scholar Hotel Group’s founder/CEO is fully realized, the iconic Nittany Lion Inn on Penn State’s campus will reopen as “the nicest university hotel in the country.”

Gary Brandeis, a 1988 Penn State grad, has big plans for both the 92-year-old Georgian-style hotel and the 29-year-old Penn Stater Hotel & Conference Center, after his company finalized a deal with the university in March to acquire the two properties under a long-term ground lease. Terms were confidential.

Brandeis intends to pour more than \$10 million into renovating the [historic Nittany Lion Inn](#) (200 W. Park Ave.), which has hosted famous guests such as former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, poet Robert Frost and musician Louis Armstrong. He wants to maintain the history and integrity of the building — his company is further incentivized by federal and state “[historic tax credits](#)” — while at the same time completely modernizing the interior to reflect a five-star hotel, one that can become a wedding destination while still boasting accessible spaces for students and locals.

“I feel the weight of the university, I feel the weight of every alumni, and I feel the weight of everyone who lives in State College on my shoulders, making sure we do the right things — and we’ll do them,” Brandeis told the CDT on a recent afternoon in downtown State College. “The university is very important to me as an alum. I spend a lot of time here, and it’s important we feel that pressure, in a good way, to make sure we deliver an amazing asset while protecting its history and integrity.”

VISION FOR AN ‘ICONIC ASSET’

Brandeis’ face should be a familiar one around State College. His company opened the 165-room Hyatt Place State College, the anchor of Fraser Centre, in March 2017. He also took over the historic Glennland Building — [and took care to honor its history](#) — while opening the 72-room Scholar Hotel State College in January 2021. And, last year, he [added two more local hotels](#) to his portfolio, in the Residence Inn by Marriott State College (1555 University Drive) and the Courtyard by Marriott State College (1730 University Drive).

With the addition of the two longtime Penn State hotels, Scholar Hotel Group now has a half-dozen properties in Happy Valley. But Brandeis acknowledged the famed Nittany Lion Inn is unique.

“As a Penn State grad and someone who’s in this community a lot, the Nittany Lion Inn is probably the second-most important building on campus besides Old Main,” Brandeis said, referring to the administrative building that can trace its roots to 1867 but was rebuilt in 1930. “It’s such an important property. It’s such an iconic asset ... so we’re taking a lot of care in the design and redevelopment and the rebirth of this building as a hotel.”

At this early point, Brandeis does not yet have interior renderings or detailed plans of the future Nittany Lion Inn. However, he has hired [award-winning hospitality design studio KKAD](#), whose work has been featured in various trade publications, and he hopes to share some early renderings with the public as soon as the end of summer.

But that doesn’t mean Brandeis doesn’t have an early vision. This month, exterior work should begin by replacing the roof and windows, in addition to painting the Nittany Lion Inn. The interior will also soon be redeveloped, with virtually everything taken out, from the bathroom tiles and sinks to the vinyl wall coverings to the carpets. Even the commercial kitchen will see significant upgrades.

PENN STATER RENOVATIONS ALSO AHEAD

Before the anticipated August 2024 opening, Brandeis would like to see three — or maybe even four — new food and beverage outlets inside the Nittany Lion Inn: a 12-hour-a-day cafe, where students might stop by and study; a redeveloped bar with a new name (no more Whiskers); and a dining room. The patio will also be open.

And, once the Nittany Lion Inn reopens, that's when a top-to-bottom renovation will start at the 300-room Penn Stater, which is about 3 miles away. The Penn Stater will remain open during renovations, which will be done in phases.

"One of the things we promised the university was we would not take rooms out of service at the Penn Stater until the rooms at the Nittany Lion Inn came back into the market," Brandeis added. "That makes sense for us from a business perspective, but the university wants to have those rooms available for not only their use but the community's use."

The roots of the deal between Penn State and Scholar Hotel Group began to take shape around 2017, when the university [implemented a task force](#) designed to help find new sources of revenue. By 2021, a consultant was hired to "[begin exploring options](#)" involving a potential sale of University Park's on-campus hotels — and Scholar Hotel Group then responded to the university's public request for offers.

By June 2022, Penn State publicly named Scholar Hotel Group as its "[preferred partner](#)." And, in March 2023, a deal was finalized.

"The university will continue to own the land that the hotels sit on, but the buildings would be owned by Scholar with a long-term ground lease," Sara Thorndike, senior vice president for finance and business, explained last year. "Eventually, at the end of the long-term ground lease, the buildings would come back to be owned by the university to reevaluate operations."

It is not known how long the ground lease might be — they typically range between 50 and 99 years — and it's also not known how much Penn State received for the sale. A university spokesperson declined to release either figure, and Brandeis would only say the lease is "going to outlive me by a mile."

Brandeis smiled when asked if he knew the target price yet for a room at the future Nittany Lion Inn. He declined to offer a figure, though he acknowledged it would be priced higher than Scholar's other hotels.

"When we're done, it's going to be a five-star experience — in the guest rooms, in the food and beverage outlets, from the ball room to the conferences and meetings, and social events," he added. "... It's going to be an amazing asset."



JOSH MOYER



Josh Moyer earned his B.A. in journalism from Penn State and his M.S. from Columbia. He's been involved in sports and news writing for nearly 20 years. He counts the best athlete he's ever seen as Tecmo Super Bowl's Bo Jackson.