



WALLA WALLA

# Union~Bulletin

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## Red Lion closes, to return in 2019 as new WW inn

Columbia Hospitality, known for award-winning hotels and facilities, bought the inn and plans a major renovation.

By **VICKI HILLHOUSE**  
of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

New owners of the Red Lion Inn & Suites will close the hotel tonight and embark on a comprehensive yearlong renovation to update the hotel as a downtown Walla Walla lodging destination.

The operation, at 325 E. Main St., will reopen in 2019 as an independent operation.

Terms of the sale were not disclosed.

The hotel has been a long-standing operation in Walla Walla. It became

a Red Lion Inn about four years ago. Before that it was Walla Walla Vineyard Inn after previously being a Howard Johnson.

Wilsonville, Ore., owner BHG Hotels sold to the new owners, a combination of investors who represent Seattle's Columbia Hospitality and ownership behind The LARK in Bozeman, Mont.

Columbia will add the facility to the growing portfolio of award-winning hotels, golf facilities conference centers and other venues it manages and operates.

Specifics of the vision for the almost 85-room facility and what it would be named were not available this morning.

However, those who know The LARK's 38-room establishment remade in recent years with

one-of-a-kind rooms each decorated with graphic art pieces by local artists will appreciate what's coming, representatives say.

Columbia's move into the Walla Walla market is a massive statement about the community's growing appeal, said Ron Williams, director of Visit Walla Walla, the city's tourism promotion arm.

"Columbia Hospitality is an absolute top-tier management company for the Pacific Northwest," Williams said.

"The idea of having them in Walla Walla means we're going to get an incredible property.

"And this is the trajectory that we've absolutely expected to see happen as more people discover Walla Walla as a boutique destination."

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# ✓Renovation to draw variety of lodgers

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Although the renovation will take rooms out of the market, the transition isn't expected to affect room stay numbers since the recent opening of La Quinta, which introduced 77 new rooms to the market.

"It's almost a trade-out," Williams noted.

The revamped hotel is expected to be an independent lodging establishment for business and leisure travelers, plus college students and families with the proximity to Whitman College and walking distance to restaurants, tasting rooms and downtown attractions.

With plans for the luxury Penrose Hotel in the works on Spokane Street, a boutique hotel slated for the southeast corner of Second Avenue and Main Street, and Fire & Vine operating the new Eritage development in the Valley, the Red

Lion transformation continues to build depth in local lodging.

Columbia Hospitality, started in 1995 by founder and CEO John Oppenheimer, includes in its portfolio the Salish Lodge & Spa overlooking the 268-foot Snoqualmie Falls and the European-style destination ski resort Knob Hill Inn at Sun Valley, Idaho, among others.

The company of more than 2,500 employees at properties in Washington, Idaho, Montana, California, New Mexico and Hawaii, and has consulted on more than 100 hospitality projects worldwide.

Columbia has been rated by Seattle Business Magazine for six years as a Best Company to Work For in Washington state.

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