

"Alaskan Couple Redeveloping Former Larry Bird Homestead"

by Kathy Kalb, Staff Reporter
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World renowned Boston Celtic and Indiana Pacers coach Larry Bird's home on Abbeydell Pike has been a must-see for fans for several years. Until now, all fans have been able to do is drive past, but that will soon change as the estate becomes the Legend of French Lick Resort under new owners Christopher Cooke and Georgianna Lincoln of Alaska.

Cooke, a 10-year trial judge, was attending his high school reunion in Ohio, the first time he had been back to the Cincinnati area since his parents passed away, when he discovered information about the renovations of Springs Valley's two grand hotels and the new casino.

Cooke said he became very interested in the project and wanted to see it, so he paid a visit to the community. During his wanderings around the Valley towns, he dropped in at Brooks Galloway Real Estate and found property prices here very reasonable. An agent suggested he look at the Larry Bird home.

When Cooke returned home and told Lincoln that the Larry Bird property was for sale, Lincoln, born and raised in Alaska far away from Indiana basketball fever, said her first thought was Who is Larry Bird? When she saw the property, however, she knew it was a star.

With a country setting and relaxed atmosphere, yet still close to the Cook Group developments, Lincoln, who served 14 years in the Alaskan state legislature and is involved in the tourism industry, said, "We saw a lot of potential."

Everything fell into line for the couple to purchase the property and they bought it.

"The property is beautiful," said Cooke. "We never get tired of the view. It's peaceful, quiet, relaxing, away from the hustle and bustle, yet half a mile away is the Resort and Casino, activities and the towns.

"I'm not used to cows, There are moose in our neighborhood," confided Lincoln. "I love to see and hear them." She also likes the deer and wild turkey and hearing the orchestra of song birds.

Seeing Orange County's clear, dark blue sky filled with stars is also one of the areas draws. "We have the Northern Lights, but it's different," commented Lincoln. "This is away from the hustle and bustle of downtown. Listening to the earth is an experience we want others to feels. I felt a closeness to the earth that I think Larry Bird felt, a sense of country."

While the property is exactly what Cooke and Lincoln are looking for, the Bird house is undergoing an extreme makeover to provide three suites and two guest rooms for lodging for 10 at the small resort.

The suites will each have a fireplace, and private bath with a jetted tub. The rooms will have full private baths and a full kitchen-sitting room area.

Lincoln said they are striving to keep the same Larry Bird atmosphere, and she thinks the house speaks of his upbringing. The rooms are big with tall doorways, but simple, and that feel will remain. Many of Bird's furnishings and lots memorabilia help keep that atmosphere intact.

Most of the renovations concern the water supply, heating and cooling, bathrooms, safety, accessibility and securing the facility, and the Alaskans were on their fifth trip to Springs Valley since May to keep involved in the remodeling process.

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One of the garages on the property is being converted to an apartment for a resident manager. A large patio area is being added onto the back of the house, and Cooke and Lincoln plan to eventually turn another garage into a reception hall available for wedding receptions and other events.

A lighted tennis court and basketball court are also features of the Legend of French Lick.

Darrell Apple oversaw maintenance of the Bird process and did a fantastic job, they noted. Lincoln said they plan to name a room after him at the Legend of French Lick.

Workers at the property tell Cooke and Lincoln that people are stopping to see what's going on. Rumor has everything from a museum to a private residence to tours taking place on the property.

"We want local people to know who we are and what we're doing, our concepts and values," Lincoln said. Updates on the new resort, renovations and grand opening event can be found on the Internet at website www.legendoffrenchlick.com.

"Larry Bird is a celebrity, and that has its upside and downside I suppose," said Cooke, "but this will make [the Legend of French Lick] an attraction for visitors. Other than the hotels, that's what French Lick is known for."

Cooke said the one thing he and Lincoln have learned from their time here is that the people are proud of Larry Bird and that this is his home. They are protective of him and don't want to see him exploited. He said, "We feel the same way. We will acknowledge that this is his house, but not commercialize that aspect."

The new owners have seen a positive reaction to their plans for the property. "There's an open and friendly and warm small town atmosphere despite the activity," said Cooke. "There's positive development occurring, and others find that attractive. All the activity is encouraging for us looking for investment opportunities."

Lincoln said there is so much activity in the area and the potential is tremendous. "It's responsible growth and can be very good growth," she said. "Mr. [Bill] Cook is a blessing to the county for reviving not only future business, but reviving history."

"We feel the intensity and the unique opportunity here," said Cooke, "and hopefully people who stay here see that also."

Cooke and Lincoln have found Springs Valley itself warm and welcoming. They said Brooks Galloway threw down the welcome mat and they have become friends. They have found that happening often as they meet people around the area.