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Munson Diner saved from demolition

By Charlie Butterbaugh

LIBERTY, NY – Even as the lifeless Munson Diner logged mile after mile en route to the Catskills on a flatbed trailer, it held its power to keep people going all night long.

In hot pursuit in the early hours of May 5 were its rescuers, Sullivan County investors who want the antique diner to serve as a stylish source of new-business energy at a main intersection in the Village of Liberty.

On the day of the historic diner's liberation from Hell's Kitchen – where the threat of demolition had loomed since 2004 – the Munson left its home of six decades at the corner of 11th Avenue and 49th Street at 3:30 a.m.

It wasn't until 4:30 p.m. that the diner arrived at Lake and South Main Streets in Liberty, where the Munson Diner Corporation, led by president Jeremy Gorelick, plans to revive the streamline stainless steel and enamel relic for operation at the gateway of the village's historic district.

“We wanted to give the diner a chance to be rejuvenated and be a part of the major renaissance in Liberty,” Gorelick said during a press conference at 1:00 p.m. He described the previous day in New York City, where he watched workers lift the diner from its foundation, and the sleepless night that followed as the driver, Mel Brandt, hit a number of transportation snags.

“We're going through a little bit of labor pains, but our baby will be here soon,” Gorelick said to the expectant crowd. NYC Port Authority police caused the delay when they stopped Brandt early in the morning after they spotted Liberty resident Gary Siegel filming the diner as it rode over the George Washington Bridge. Then, a slight collision with an abandoned railroad bridge in Harriman took some tar off the diner's roof, which led to police requiring Brandt to obtain a new transportation permit.

“Luckily, we were planning on resurfacing the roof anyway,” Gorelick said.

As they waited, many people were eager to talk about what the diner might mean for Liberty.

Arthur Katz grew up in the village, graduated from Liberty High School in 1970 and left five years later as the community began to fall on hard economic times.

“We're thrilled to death about it really,” Katz said, adding that the antique diner, once its restoration is complete, will have the potential to attract drivers from Route 17. Katz returned to Liberty last summer and opened Cats Mountain Antiques on Main Street with his wife Paula. The opening of their store has coincided with the opening of five other antique shops in the village.

“I saw the writing on the wall. It’s clear as a bell; Liberty is coming back,” he said.

At the press conference, Village Trustee Allan Berube urged the crowd to keep an eye on the corner of Lake and South Main.

“Watch this corner,” he said. “What may not look in top form at the moment has a great future.”

The village has undertaken a 2005 Sullivan Renaissance project to revamp the corner. A two-year initiative will include new landscaping and a signage system and the development of a picnic park in front of the diner. All of this will coincide with a complete resurfacing of South Main Street by 2007, Liberty’s bicentennial year.

The diner, built by the Kullman Company of New Jersey in the 1940s, needs a new foundation and some restoration work. Berube said a planned addition will include a new kitchen and bathrooms, a historic display area, a full basement and a wheelchair ramp.

“It’s in very good shape. A lot of the original fixtures are in there,” including the original booths and glass block corners, Berube said.

The Munson Diner Corporation was able to salvage the diner’s original neon sign, which also needs to be restored, and the diner will retain its original name.

Gorelick, who is currently looking for a diner operator, said the menu will offer food that is “diner-inspired, if not greasy spoon.”

The corporation has set July 4 of this year as the target date for completion.

Anthony Martinez, a barber who advertises “New York Cuts” for \$10 on the window of his shop on Main Street, said “Who knows what the diner will bring for us up here. It did wonders for the city.”

However, Martinez said, the village needs to increase its efforts to provide kids with more activities after school.

“The next thing they need to put on a flatbed is a boys’ and girls’ club,” he said.