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Coke plant new home for Harleys

By [Lee Howard](#) Day Staff Writer

Mike's Famous leaving Groton for New London

Mike's Famous Harley-Davidson finally will be motoring to the New London side of the Thames River.

The motorcycle sales and service operator, which previously had unsuccessfully sought to open a location in East Lyme, and at one time considered another site on Crystal Avenue in New London, closed on a \$550,000 deal last month to purchase the former Coca-Cola bottling plant at 951 Bank St. The dealership will be one of the largest in the Northeast when it opens in December.

Mike Schwartz, owner of the Delaware-based motorcycle business, said Friday that the massive 55,000-square-foot building he is in the middle of renovating will be his business headquarters. The Bank Street site more than quadruples the size of his current location at 1416 Gold Star Highway in Groton, which will be winding down operations, he said.

"It's an incredible building," Schwartz said during an hourlong tour of the rambling structure on a nearly 5-acre site. "The attractiveness of the building was the grittiness of the warehouse."

Schwartz said he will incorporate much of the building's current features, including tongue-and-groove ceilings, warehouse-style windows and steel trusses, into the design of his new Harley-Davidson showroom. Redoing the floors and installing new lighting will be a major part of re-imagining the space as a vibrant retail establishment, he said.

"This building is the perfect backdrop for the products that we sell," he said.

Schwartz said he started looking at the 1938 landmark building last spring, but couldn't close on the deal with the Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Southeastern New England until he had all approvals in place.

The building, with its distinctive curve, served as a bottling operation for more than half a century before being converted into a distribution center in 2003. Coca-Cola Bottling moved out of the building three years ago when it opened a new 74,000-square-foot sales and distribution center in Waterford.

Schwartz said the building has enough space for an expansive showroom to display more than 200 motorcycles, along with all-terrain vehicles and watercraft. It also will allow for a drive-in service and parts operation while providing space for storage as well.

"It's always been the goal to find the right location for the business," Schwartz said. "It's been a challenge."

He bought the former New London County Motorcycle Sales in Groton in 2004 and the following year proposed a large Harley-Davidson dealership on Industrial Park Road in East Lyme, where Bob's Discount Furniture is now located. But local opposition eventually killed the plans.

He then had a brief flirtation with a site on Crystal Avenue, but eventually dropped the idea.

On Bank Street, he is working with Groton-based civil engineer Clint Brown of DeCesare-Bentley Engineers, Carlin Construction Co. of New London and Point One Architects in Old Lyme to

design a space that will be flexible enough for a wide range of activities, including public and private events.

"We have this very short window to get it right," said Sabrina Foulke of Point One Architects, who is helping coordinate the project.

Schwartz said the idea is to highlight the building's inherent beauty and use found objects on site and reclaimed materials elsewhere to create an interesting ambiance. Lumber, brick and even corrugated metal will make its way into the design, he said, as well as some of the current concrete flooring.

"It's an iconic building, an iconic brand," Schwartz said. "Coca-Cola and Harley-Davidson are two of the most iconic American brands in the world."

Schwartz said New London has been very enthusiastic about the project, and though the business will have residential neighbors, he has not encountered major obstacles along the way to approval.

The business could employ as many as 40, Schwartz said, about double the numbers that work in Groton during the warmest months of the year, when motorcycle sales are at their highest.

"This is a great American city," he said. "I'm very proud of the fact we have an opportunity to take a part of town that has been a little downtrodden and try to inject some life and vibrancy into it."

l.howard@theday.com
