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CLIENT STORY

Company:

Vista Host

Industry:

Hospitality

Wish You Were Here: Vista Host

Mike Harrell was thinking about the ongoing construction in San Antonio, in particular the pouring of piers on a rain-soaked morning for Vista Host's newest property. The two-in-one hotel – a combined Home2 Suites by Hilton and Hampton Inn – on the city's famed Riverwalk is under construction with financing from Western Alliance Hotel Franchise Finance.

It makes sense that Harrell, who learned to love the hotel business from the ground up when he started in college as a night auditor, would be thinking about foundations. His bottom-to-top approach – as he's just as likely to talk about the interior design details and the precision of TV channel lists as the design of the financing – is evident.

"Some people might say that's my Achilles' heel, because I'm so detail-focused," says Harrell, describing the look and feel that will capture a sense of the historic San Antonio but with a completely contemporary vibe. For its hotel projects, Vista Host slants toward college towns, capital cities, cities with historic draws and those that pull crowds for live concerts or football games, as well as bread-and-butter business types.

With 33 properties and 1,000 employees, the Texas hotel company has succeeded, says Harrell, because it doesn't just build, it operates. Understanding what travelers value has helped the company create a wide range of successful limited and full-service hotels bearing various Hilton and Marriott brands. The goal is to create preference: "We want our guests to call home and say 'I wish you were here with me,'" says Harrell.

It's possible that few hoteliers have as much experience or history with the hotel class that has become the "go-to" for millions – the select-service concept that is a specialty of Vista Host. Harrell's first portfolio included five Holiday Inns when it and Ramada dominated the landscape. But the rise of free-standing restaurants in the 1980s set the table for a new idea – mid-range hotels without restaurants – and Harrell took note. Vista Host has built the ninth-ever Hampton Inn, converted 10 existing properties to the Hampton Inn flag and more. Harrell has also been a member of the Hampton Advisory Board since its inception.

Though he'll quickly say what he looks for in a bank is "the best price," Harrell goes on to talk about – what else – the details. "We're always looking for the bank that will be the best partner for us on a project. The team at Western Alliance has been very helpful – they've taught us a lot in helping us build hotels. They excel at process during construction, and making sure that all the i's get dotted and all the t's get crossed. They bring it all to the project." Unlike some regional financing players, Western Alliance provides construction oversight that is completely in-house, notes Harrell.

The new San Antonio property, set to open in October 2018, is Vista Host's third with the team at Western Alliance Hotel Franchise Finance, including hotels in St. Paul, Minnesota and Moab, Utah.

"It has turned out to be a good, successful marriage," says Harrell, "and we haven't missed a beat."