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CALIFORNIAN BUYS GRAY MOSS INN CLEARWATER HOTEL SOLD FOR \$1.65-MILLION

The Gray Moss Inn, a turn-of-the-century downtown hotel, has been sold to a California lawyer for \$1.65-million.

The hotel at 215 S Fort Harrison Ave. is across the street from another landmark Clearwater hotel: the Fort Harrison. The Fort Harrison Hotel is owned by the Church of Scientology, which has its worldwide spiritual headquarters in Clearwater.

The buyer of the Gray Moss is Los Angeles lawyer Bert B. Babero.

The sale was handled by state Rep. Gerald S. "Jerry" Rehm, R-Clearwater, who is also a real estate agent. Asked if Babero was a Scientologist, Rehm said, "Never asked him."

He previously had said the Church of Scientology, which also has a large facility in Los Angeles, expressed no interest in buying the property. Several of the first-floor retail stores at the hotel cater to the Scientologists.

Rehm referred additional questions to a local lawyer who had done a background check on Babero on behalf of a client who had a first mortgage on the property. The lawyer could not be reached for comment. Nor could Babero, or a spokesperson for the Church of Scientology.

Barbara Holland, a real estate agent who handled the sale with Rehm, said her understanding was that Babero would apply for city or county grants that help provide affordable housing for the poor. The grants would be used to renovate the building, which has about 90 rooms, she said.

"It'll definitely be remodeled for housing, and that's about all I know," Ms. Holland said.

In an interview last September, Ms. Holland had said the asking price was \$1.5-million. The hotel is assessed for tax purposes at \$414,700. The previous owners are John and Darlene Van Harlingen of Sherman Oaks, Calif.

The hotel has been used as a low-cost residence in recent years. More than 108 residents were evacuated from the building after an April fire that caused between \$50,000 and \$100,000 in damage.

KEYWORDS: BUILDING SALE