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‘A missed opportunity’

Tryon sees equestrian industry economic growth Wellington could have had



Wilton Porter of Dallas, Texas competes in the \$210K Tryon Grand Prix CSI4* at the Tryon International Equestrian Center in western North Carolina on Saturday, June, 6. (Nathan Gray/Special to the Post)

By **Kristen M. Clark**
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

POLK COUNTY, N.C. — Eighteen months ago, the valley beneath Pea Ridge was only dense forest against the picturesque backdrop of western North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains.

But in this remote area 10 miles from Tryon, Mark Bellissimo and Roger Smith saw more: the opportunity to build the world's greatest equestrian lifestyle destination.

The venue and resort they envisioned could rival if not surpass, any other — even Wellington. Today, the 1-year-old Tryon International Equestrian Center invokes awe and praise even as parts are still under construction.

"Disneyland for equestrians," local residents and visitors call it.

It's been so successful that Bellissimo, Smith and four other families now plan to invest as much as double the \$100 million they first pledged into building the 1,400-acre Tryon Resort.



Mark Bellissimo, Wellington resident and co-founder of Tryon Equestrian Partners, stands on a ridge overlooking the Tryon International Equestrian Center, a 1,400-acre equestrian venue and resort that's being built in the foothills of western North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains. (Kristen M. Clark / The Palm Beach Post)

Some 600 miles away in Wellington, the Tryon equestrian center symbolizes what many describe as "a missed opportunity": tens of millions of dollars in capital investment, jobs and future gains Wellington could have had but chased away.

And the lost potential goes beyond the village.

Palm Beach County already reaps a \$150-200 million annual economic impact from the winter equestrian season, a figure that continues to climb but could have soared if Bellissimo and his partners — who own and operate the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center (PBIEC) — kept their money in South Florida.



The Tryon International Equestrian Center in Mill Spring, NC as seen from the center's RV parking lot. (Nathan Gray/Special to the Post)

Bellissimo said a paralyzing political climate in Wellington, which makes it torturous to do business, drove them to look elsewhere.

Some builders and farm owners are fed up, too.

They say the village's barriers prevent the "Winter Equestrian Capital of the World" from realizing its full potential, from prospering more than it is, and from retaining its claim as the U.S.'s premier equestrian destination.

That's a recognition Tryon hopes to have.

And does already in some minds.



Families enjoy a Sunday afternoon of show-jumping at the Tryon International Equestrian Center on June 7, 2015. The center is being built on a 1,400-acre resort that's owned by Wellington equestrian mogul Mark Bellissimo and several business partners who also have a stake in the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center in Wellington. (Kristen M. Clark / The Palm Beach Post)

What could have been

Wellington first gained prominence in equestrian sport 30 years ago by attracting Prince Charles and other British royalty to its polo fields.

Polo remains a major attraction, and the Winter Equestrian Festival also draws a growing number of spectators and top-ranked show-jumpers every season — including big names like Jessica Springsteen, Georgina Bloomberg and Jennifer Gates, daughters of Bruce Springsteen, Michael Bloomberg and Bill Gates, respectively.

Because of that global status, some officials in Wellington and Palm Beach County don't believe Tryon is any threat to Wellington's equestrian industry nor does it take away from the village's boon.

"From what I'm hearing, our equestrian community has lost nothing," Wellington Mayor Bob Margolis said. "I just don't see it."

But others say Tryon Resort should be a wake-up call to Wellington leaders who failed to see the far-reaching repercussions of their decisions and political spats.

"We're one of the very few communities that has a visionary like (Bellissimo) willing to invest so much into a local community," said Michela Perillo-Green, executive director of the Wellington Chamber of Commerce. "It's a shame that money would go to another community that could have been spent in Wellington."



Mark Bellissimo, managing partner of Tryon International Equestrian Center and Wellington, FL, middle, and his wife Katherine Bellissimo watch the Belmont Stakes on a large display screen at the center before the start of the

Bellissimo cannot fully replicate in Wellington what he's building in Tryon; The footprint doesn't exist because of Wellington's landlocked venues.

But Wellington could have had a version of Tryon. That's what Equestrian Village, the dressage venue at the corner of Pierson Road



Wellington Mayor Bob Margolis

\$210K Tryon Grand Prix CS14 that was held on Saturday, June 6.
(Nathan Gray/Special to the Post)

and South Shore Boulevard, was supposed to be.

The covered arena, show rings, stadium and stables were going to be complemented by a hotel, shops and other permanent facilities that would have made Equestrian

Village a self-sustaining destination — much like what Tryon is becoming.

"It became a political football and turned into something far less than what we expected to do," Bellissimo said.

The hotel is off the table, and the shops aren't built.

Feuding factions

Bellissimo's struggles in Wellington go back nearly a decade to when he bought PBIEC and the rights to the Winter Equestrian Festival in 2006, saving the foundering event.

Bellissimo took the exclusive venue that catered to the wealthy elite and opened it to the masses, ditching admission fees and installing a carousel to make families feel welcome.

About four years ago, Bellissimo sought to expand that experience by building Equestrian Village. **But he was met with fierce resistance from vocal critics** — led by the Jacobs family — who feared the dressage venue would bring over-development to Wellington's equestrian preserve, 9,200 acres strictly regulated under village code.

"We're not anti-development. We're just anti-development in the preserve," said Charlie Jacobs, CEO of the Boston Bruins hockey team and a competitive show-jumper. "If Mark or their investors want to build a hotel or anything else they aim to do, we're certainly all for it provided it's not within the preserve."

The fight over Equestrian Village isn't over, even as the venue just finished its fourth year hosting the Global Dressage Festival. The Jacobs family, which owns a nearby condo and the 200-acre Deeridge Farm down Pierson Road, is suing over the development. A trial is scheduled for December.

Meanwhile, Bellissimo said he still has big plans for Wellington, including renovations to modernize PBIEC.

But as he promised last summer, those plans are on hold until Wellington's political climate changes. The next election is in March.

In 2012, the Jacobs family — through relatives and a business empire that includes Delaware North Cos. and the Boston Bruins — spent about \$800,000 on the village election to support like-minded candidates that ultimately won seats on the Wellington Council: Margolis, Vice Mayor John Greene and Councilman Matt Willhite.

The council members deny the campaign money or the family has had any influence on their decisions.

"If you look at our votes, everything that Mark came to the village for approval for, he got approval for," Margolis said.

But it hasn't been without lawsuits and repeated battles. When an item related to Bellissimo comes before council, it's often subjected to a level of scrutiny above what other applicants typically face.

Despite the continuous hurdles, Bellissimo said he loves Wellington and wants to do more there.

"But I'm not going to fight to a point of just wasting a lot of people's energy," Bellissimo said. "I could stay there and spin my wheels, or I can show what we're capable of: Demonstrate and let other people judge the effectiveness of what we've created and how significant it is in the equestrian world."

"Tryon becomes the great model," he said.

'Still experiencing growth'

The venues in Tryon and Wellington are not head-to-head competitors. While Wellington has a lock on the winter season, Tryon offers an alternative in the remaining nine months that equestrians spend traveling circuits in New York, Canada or Europe.

With its modern design and permanent features, Tryon — competitors and visitors say — has the potential to be the "best show-jumping complex in the world," jeopardizing Wellington's status as the country's elite equestrian destination.

"This is, I believe, the most spectacular equestrian venue in the world at this point," Bellissimo said of Tryon. "There's no reason why Wellington couldn't be a leader."

But some officials in Wellington and Palm Beach County said they're OK with how Wellington's equestrian industry is growing now and Tryon isn't of consequence.

"I wish Mark the best of luck in Tryon; I hope it's a great success," Margolis said. "If Mark is talking about a loss of revenue in the village of Wellington, I'm at a loss to understand where that's from if in fact he's had the best season ever."

Business is, indeed, booming.

Wellington's three main venues — PBIEC, Equestrian Village and the International Polo Club — indicated record attendance, participants and prize money during the 2015 winter season.

Palm Beach County sees the widespread benefits from that.

Polo attracts 160,000 spectators, and the winter festival brings in more than 250,000 — including visitors and participants from 33 countries and all 50 states. They come for the venues, but live, dine and shop throughout the county. The three-month winter festival alone generates 122,000 bed-nights from which the county gets tax revenue.

"There's a ton of dollars and a big infusion of wealth that's occurred because of the Winter Equestrian Festival, and that's not going anywhere," said George Linley, executive director of the Palm Beach County Sports Commission. "Whether we could have more growth, I guess that's possible, but right now we're still experiencing growth."

Other local leaders said Wellington shouldn't take its status for granted, lest Bellissimo leave entirely or Tryon surpass Wellington in prominence.

"My fear is not something else in North Carolina competing with us; it's something in Florida," Wellington Councilwoman Anne Gerwig said.

But with Tryon, "absolutely, yes, we've missed that chance" for more investment in Wellington, she said.

"It's hard for me to look at it like direct competition, but in a perfect world, we'd be their shinier sister," Gerwig said.

The village does little to market any of the venues, although council members said last month they want to do more to market the community as a whole.

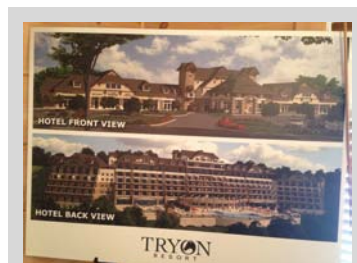
And meanwhile, Palm Beach County and state tourism officials have stepped up to better promote Wellington's equestrian industry as another attraction of the Palm Beaches.

"From the county level, we are doing all we can to support the entire equestrian industry, Mark's business included," said County Commissioner Melissa McKinlay, a candidate for U.S. Congress. "I hate to see any industry leave us for another state and will continue to do what I can to make sure that doesn't happen."

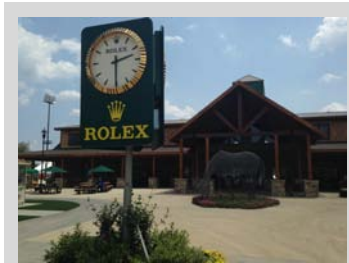
'An economic driver'

Elected officials and business leaders in Tryon are well aware of Bellissimo's conflicts in Wellington but have welcomed his team with open arms.

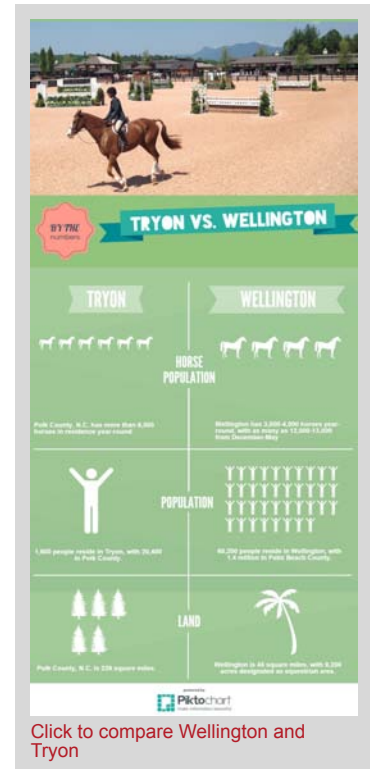
"I'm glad they allowed us to have the opportunity. They should have worked out their problems," Polk County Commissioner Michael Gage said.



Future plans for the 1,400-acre Tryon Resort include a hotel that will be built by Salamander Hotels & Resorts, shown here in this rendering on display at the Tryon horse show office. The hotel is planned to have an entrance with



The Legends Club serves as the main building at the Tryon International Equestrian Center, inviting spectators into the showgrounds. It houses the Legends Club Grille, which is open to the public. (Kristen M. Clark / The Palm Beach Post)



Whether because of lessons learned from Wellington or because local rules are less restrictive, **Bellissimo has found in North Carolina none of the roadblocks or red-tape** commonplace in Wellington. When Bellissimo and his partners unveiled their vision last year for the Tryon International Equestrian Center and resort, local officials in western North Carolina said they quickly realized how unprepared they were for such an attraction in their backyard.

They'd heard promises before about big projects that could breathe new life into the Carolina Foothills, but none came close to the grand scale of what Bellissimo had planned.

Some acknowledge they had initial doubts whether he could pull it off.

But rather than shoo Bellissimo away, scrutinize his motives or reject his proposals — reactions Bellissimo grew accustomed to in Wellington — local, county and state

two stories above ground on top of a ridge, while the backside will be built into the ridge itself overlooking the Tryon International Equestrian Center. (Kristen M. Clark / The Palm Beach Post)

leaders in North Carolina have eagerly worked with him so he can build an international destination that benefits the entire region.

"They exceeded everything they said they were going to do," Polk County Commission Chairman Tom Pack said last month of Bellissimo and his partners. "It's been an economic driver for us. ... They've given back; they created jobs."

Since construction began in early 2014, the 1-year-old equestrian center has spawned 700 construction jobs and 500-600 part-time, seasonal jobs — using

almost exclusively a local workforce and offering opportunities to unemployed and underemployed residents in the wake of the recession.

"This is providing that opportunity for kids to come back and for families to stay together," Gage said.

Collaborating across borders

Local, county and state leaders from both the public and private sectors are coming together in a never-before-seen partnership that crosses the boundaries of several cities, five counties and two states.

By doing so, the entire region benefits from the economic boon of Bellissimo's investment, and no single community bears the growing pains that naturally come with such projects, officials said. "We realize the limitations of a small rural community, what we can and can't provide," Polk County Manager Marche Pittman said.

For example, Polk County doesn't employ the types of inspectors necessary to review and approve the buildings under construction at the equestrian center.

No problem. Neighboring Rutherford County provided theirs, Pack said.

"And Rutherfordton (8 miles away) is actually providing the sewer line for this," he said, "so the line actually comes from Rutherford County into Polk County to service the equestrian center."

That kind of widespread regional collaboration just doesn't exist with Wellington's equestrian industry.

Local officials in Tryon also don't squabble about traffic drawn to the equestrian venue or the road improvements necessary to accommodate it, arguments that have happened frequently with Wellington's attractions because they sit off a two-lane road in the heart of the village.

During the Tryon center's official grand opening in early June, traffic was backed up for a mile on the nearby highway as 10,000 spectators arrived for the evening's grand prix show.

"Next week, our county managers and our county sheriffs are not going to be complaining; they're going to be looking at solutions," Rutherford County Commission Chairman Bryan King said that evening. The business community is making accommodations, too. Some local shops and restaurants are adjusting their schedules to cater to equestrian visitors.

Even business owners seeing lower revenue because of Tryon Resort still praise its arrival.



Future plans for the 1,400-acre Tryon Resort include a hotel that will be built by Salamander Hotels & Resorts. The hotel is planned to have an entrance with two stories above ground on top of a ridge, while the backside will be built into the ridge itself, shown here, overlooking the Tryon International Equestrian Center. (Kristen M. Clark / The Palm Beach Post)

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Because the resort will be self-contained — a city unto itself, with lodging, dining and shopping — visitors have less need to travel to nearby towns, causing some restaurant owners, like Suzanne Strickland, to see a dip in business.

Strickland has owned Stone Soup restaurant in nearby Landrum, S.C., for 12 years. She built her brand by attracting hungry equestrians from the two other venues this region has.

"Business is slightly down, but I'm going to get it from other areas," Strickland said. "That's the nature of business; now I need to re-adjust. ... (Tryon Resort) will be very positive, and it will be interesting to see how the towns are actually affected."

North Carolina's governor personally pledged last month the state would do whatever it could to help make the resort and sporting venue a success.

"This is going to be a mark in the nation; this is going to be an international mark, right now, for generations to come," Gov. Pat McCrory said during a visit to the equestrian center's grand opening in June.

Government and business leaders agree the long-term impacts of the Tryon venue will take years to realize, but they cite few negatives or concerns about what that future might bring.

"We're kind of sitting back to watch and see what happens," said Janet Sciacca, executive director of the Carolina Foothills Chamber of Commerce. "We've heard from people who are horse people who have come from out of the area, out of the country, and they have confirmed: 'Oh yes, this is going to be the most beautiful equestrian event center in the world.'"

Leaving Wellington



Pat McCrory, left, governor of North Carolina, shakes hands with Mark Bellissimo, managing partner of Tryon International Equestrian Center and Wellington, FL resident, during a press conference at the center in Mill Spring, NC on Saturday, June 6. (Nathan Gray/Special to the Post)



Shane Sweetnam of Wellington, FL competes in the \$210K Tryon Grand Prix CS14 at the Tryon International Equestrian Center in Mill Spring, NC on Saturday, June 6. (Nathan Gray/Special to the Post)

Bellissimo is not the only one leaving Wellington for friendlier pastures in North Carolina.

Some business and farm owners, complaining of Wellington's difficult environment, say they are looking northward, too.

Ken Aussiker has lived in Wellington for 30 years. But Tryon will be his home now.

"I'm going; I'm done. I'm wrapping up the projects I have there and I'm buying property up here," Aussiker said last month, while taking a break from building a barn near the Tryon equestrian center. The builder and owner of Wellington Equestrian Development — whose handiwork is on countless barns and structures in Wellington — is walking away from the village because, like others, he says village leaders have made it intolerable to do business there.

"There was a lot of the government creating policies that have just overburdened it — past the point where it's just not worth it," Aussiker said.

He'd rather take his business to the Carolina Foothills, where government and community leaders are more welcoming, more predictable and more consistent with their rules, he said.

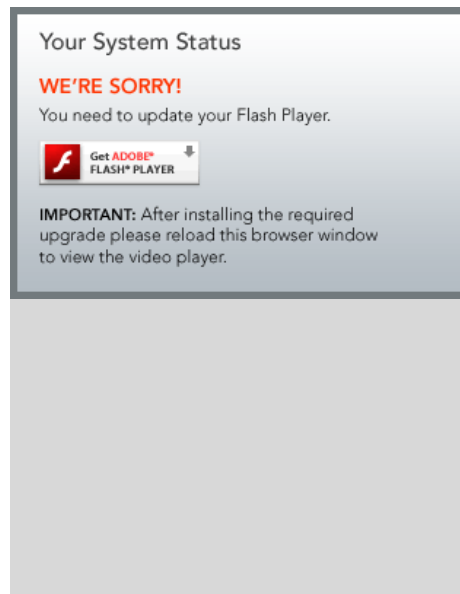
In Wellington, it's a "burden" both in time and money to try to do business, Aussiker said.

"I don't want to sound like I'm vindictive; but ... they don't realize what they do to all us guys that have been building there," he said. "Up here, I'll be done in three months with a full stable quicker than I would even get a permit in Florida."

Aussiker is among many small-business owners in Wellington who share Bellissimo's complaints of an "obstructionist" climate that they say forces businesses to bend to the village's rules — rather than the village collaboratively working with them as partners toward a common good.



Ken Aussiker



"It is so painful to get the most basic concept through; It's a fight to do something so benign," Bellissimo said. "There's no one spending the amount of money we're spending in the industry. And they chased it away. There's no question about it"

Calling Wellington "so business friendly," Margolis dismisses concerns from the business community. His official response to departing business owners like Aussiker?

It's not Wellington's fault they have problems getting building permits or approvals, and "best of luck" to those who leave.

"The people that tell you we're not business-friendly, I believe, are the people who haven't taken advantage of everything we have to offer," Margolis said. "And maybe those people had difficulties with the village of Wellington, abiding by our codes and our regulations."

He said Wellington's building staff "bends over backwards" to work with landowners, and more often than not, he says, landowners bring obstacles on themselves — because they either don't follow or don't understand Wellington's strict approval process.

"I've seen this time and time again," Margolis said, adding: "You're always going to have people who use an excuse for something to do something else, and if those people are happy in Tryon, I wish them the best of luck."

Impacts trickle down

Like Aussiker, other small-business and farm owners in Wellington say they're looking to leave, too. They see no inviting reason to stay since they feel their complaints are ignored.

"I know contractors that refuse to work in Wellington. They refuse, because of the animosity and the way that they're treated," said Carol Cohen, a dressage rider who owns Two Swans Farm in Wellington. Cohen was in Tryon last month looking at properties for sale because she said she's considering moving her home out of Wellington, where she's lived for more than a decade.

She said village leaders don't realize that the fallout from the yearslong conflicts between Bellissimo, the Jacobs family and the Wellington Council has trickled down to affect everyday people.

"It's the small-business owners in Wellington that this has hurt so badly: the riders and the farm owners, and so many people that don't have the deep pockets that this has hurt and frightened away," Cohen said.



The covered arena at the Tryon International Equestrian Center, shown here under construction in early June, is 400 feet long by 240

Wellington has 61,000 residents, so "if only 1 percent of the people that do business in the village are complaining, we're extremely successful," Margolis said.

During a council workshop a couple weeks ago, other council members voiced a similar opinion. They said they want to better promote Wellington as a business-friendly location, but they simultaneously brushed off repeated criticisms they acknowledge they've heard from the private sector — concluding that they come from "a very small group of people" with a "political agenda."

It's unclear just how widespread the complaints truly are. They do happen often though and come from a variety of business owners, equestrian and non-equestrian alike.

Some in Wellington said Margolis and other council members' comments reinforce why business owners feel unwanted in Wellington.

"We can't afford nor should we want to give that impression that people are replaceable," said Perillo-Green of the Wellington Chamber. "We need to be more appreciative and we need to embrace people who want to do business in this town."

feet wide, which is larger than the covered arena at Wellington Equestrian Village dressage venue. (Kristen M. Clark / The Palm Beach Post)

A welcoming economy

In contrast, leaders in Tryon crave the influx of businesses, visitors and economic development. They want to remove obstacles, while also ensuring Bellissimo's Tryon Resort suits their rural area.

"We're watching him closely, and he knows we're watching him closely," said Libbie Johnson, former Polk County economic development director. "But so far, he's done what he's said he's going to do."



Small shops line Trade Street in downtown Tryon, N.C., in the foothills of western North Carolina. Blue Ridge Mountains. The town of 1,700 people is the namesake for the nearby Tryon International Equestrian Center, located about 10 miles away in rural Polk County. (Kristen M. Clark / The Palm Beach Post)

The local economy has already seen a surge, even while some of the other staples of Tryon Resort — a luxury hotel, a sports complex and small ranches for sale — haven't been built yet.

Polk County estimates the equestrian center will have a \$30-50 million economic impact this year, and the county's tourism budget doubled in the last year from extra tax revenue.

The impacts — both long-term benefits and short-term growing pains — are rippling across the region from Asheville, N.C., to Spartanburg, S.C., with few complaints.

"This whole project has been nothing but an example of collaboration: state, local, private," said Pittman, the Polk County Manager. "It's exactly what economic development should be."

The Tryon region rejoices at the related growth that's coming from equestrians, visitors and business owners investing money in all levels of the local economy.

Government and business leaders in Polk County said they've even heard from Wellington residents who have asked about available land, because, like Cohen or Aussiker, they're considering relocating or adding second farms there.

"The South has always been welcoming to economic development," Tryon Mayor Jim Wright said. "It's on the belief that it raises the standard of a lot of people and a lot of communities around it."

Aussiker started his new business, Trycon Builders, several months ago in Polk County and said he has faced no obstacles so far.

He plans to hire 10 workers in the coming months, and some of his employees at Wellington Equestrian Development even want to move to the Tryon area, too, he said.

"Without a doubt, there's a great business potential up here," Aussiker said. "I think for somebody from Wellington, after everything that's gone on, I don't see why they wouldn't want to be up here."