

Falun Gong Film Making Company Buys New Hope Farms Equestrian Park

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Crews film at the New Century Film site in March 2018 for "90 Days Counting Down," an unreleased movie currently in post-production

HUGUENOT -- A fledgling Asian film studio and production company has grand plans to grow into a modern TV and moviemaking center at the former New Hope Farms Equestrian Park in Huguenot.

The project, which could reach \$10 million, calls for converting three large former Olympic equestrian training buildings and a guest house into 65,000 square feet of sound stages, offices, housing for film crews, one or more shops, and areas for wardrobe storage, set-building, film equipment and props, New Century Film's leaders said.

The devotees of the Falun Gong Chinese spiritual practice, who run the company, also envision an outdoor Asian cultural events area, plus a Chinese restaurant, a farm and a Tang Dynasty-style garden.

The size and pace of the project, much of which could be done over the next five years, depends on the Town of Deerpark Planning Board's approval and investor fundraising, the film studio and production company's leaders said. A planning board application is imminent.

New Century Film has already come a long way since its 2017 founding, producing eight of its own short, low-budget independent films, and distributing its offerings via New Tang Dynasty Television, a New York City-based global TV network.

So far, it's invested nearly \$500,000 to convert its 517 Neversink Drive property's guest house into offices, while fixing a horse ring's roof, aided by a \$100,000 state grant. And the firm has grown to include five employees in Deerpark and 10 in a Toronto office, said Shirley Hu, the company's majority owner.

The Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the Korean founder of the Unification of World Christianity, gradually built New Hope Farms between 1986 and 1994 for Olympic training for his equestrian children. The 40-acre property also was leased for concerts and various horse shows and competitions until its 2012 closing.

Now, Hu, 46, hopes to keep rejuvenating the site, capitalizing on a growing Hudson Valley film industry. The property is already state-designated for a TV and film production tax credit, and New Century Film makes movies and holds Asian cultural events there.

"From a real estate point of view, they have an incredible space with a ton of potential," said Summer Crockett Moore, who runs Choice Films, an independent film production company, and Umbra Sound Stage in Newburgh.



New Century Film plans on converting three large former Olympic equestrian training buildings, including this one, into a moviemaking center outside of Port Jervis

"It could have a real cultural and artistic impact," Crockett Moore added. "It's perfectly situated to feel like you're in a very remote place, but you're also very close to the center of everything in Manhattan."

Hu, a native of the Northeast Chinese city of Harbin, claims to be well off and well-connected to the international business world, from formerly co-owning an investment firm and stock brokerage with an ex-husband and from a father who owns an auto parts manufacturer in China.

Hu said her co-owner, Ke Li, is a Chinese-American immigrant who ran a construction business in Jiangxi province, and that he first bought the 171,502-square-foot New Hope Farm facilities for \$1.2 million in 2015.

Hu said she fled China after being imprisoned for supporting the Falun Gong, inspiring her to use filmmaking to spread the spiritual practice's principles of truthfulness, compassion and tolerance.

The Falun Gong philosophy relies on controversial founder Li Hongzhi's teachings, which combine Qigong, a Tai Chi-like system of exercises, Buddhism and mysticism to cultivate self-improvement and spiritual salvation.

New Century Film is making movies "to get people off the wheel of suffering," Hu said. "It's about getting people to be more honest and have more integrity. Movies are one of the best vehicles to tell such stories."

Hu and company president Peter Wei, 48, former president of the Epoch Times Los Angeles, a Chinese and English newspaper, are "working diligently to find investors," said Maureen Halahan, president of the Orange County Partnership, an economic development agency.

"They've made inroads with getting them to come see the project and tour the site," Halahan added. "With every project comes risk and questions, but so far (Hu and Wei) have been living up to their promises."

Deerpark Deputy Supervisor David Dean sounded a cautious note about their firm's expansion goals.

"So far, it's a plus," Dean said. "The difficulty becomes: How does one make use of such a vast expanse?"

Until we see on paper exactly what they're planning, it's a little difficult to say, 'Yeah, this is or isn't going to be a great thing.'"

State Assemblyman Karl Brabenec, a former Deerpark supervisor, said local leaders have been burned by the nearby Dragon Springs enclave, which is run by different Falun Gong followers.

He said that they've "turned that property into a beautiful area," but he accused its leaders of repeatedly flouting Deerpark Planning Board rules by overbuilding.

It's a plus for New Century Film that it's paying property taxes, Brabenec said. The Dragon Springs site is tax exempt.

"The potential of this New Hope Farms property being revitalized and bringing some economic activity and tourism in the area is a good thing, as long as everything is done properly and by the letter of the law," Brabenec said.

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