

# The Virginian-Pilot

PilotOnline.com

## Hidden pagoda in Norfolk could reopen this summer

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[The Virginian-Pilot](#)
- April 18, 2016



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The pagoda in the Freemason section of Norfolk is called a hidden gem by residents. Photographed on April 13, 2016, it stands vacant as restaurants have had a tough time with the tucked-away location. The foundation that manages it is currently in preliminary negotiations with a new manager.

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Walk toward battleship Wisconsin from the Freemason neighborhood, and you might stumble upon an anachronism: a jewel-box octagonal building, surrounded by ornate gardens and a koi pond.

The pagoda, a gift from Taiwan built in 1989, may look vibrant from the outside, but it has sat vacant on the waterfront since November.

Though supporters often call it the city's hidden gem, it's the "hidden" part that may make it a challenging place to do business. Between 2012 and 2015, the pagoda at 265 W. Tazewell St. went through two restaurant operators.

Madeline Sly, president of the Friends of the Pagoda & Oriental Garden Foundation, said the nonprofit, which manages the city property, is in contract negotiations to reopen as the Imperial restaurant. Phillip Thomason, chef and owner of the 12-year-old Vintage Kitchen, is the would-be partner. The two are collaborating already on a few upcoming events at the site.

"It is a hidden treasure, but we certainly want other people to know about it," Sly said.

Since the last restaurant manager, the foundation has started renovations to improve the building. Crews have ripped out the dated carpet and replaced it with tile – a \$30,000 project.

The pagoda, also called the Marine Observation Tower, was first conceived in 1983. The Taiwanese government proposed the gift to celebrate trade ties. Six years later, the two-story, 58-foot building was constructed with pillars that once supported a 500,000-gallon molasses storage tank.

Though Taiwan contributed up to \$700,000 for the project, the city kicked in nearly \$300,000 for structural work, according to a June 1987 report in *The Virginian-Pilot*.

The Freemason neighborhood formed the foundation in 1998 to care for the facility and grounds. Under a five-year lease with the city, the foundation pays \$1 per year, and all revenue the nonprofit earns from social functions or subleases goes back to maintaining the park. The agreement allows the foundation to sublet the space for a restaurant and set the rent and fees.

Thomason wants to translate the building's history into the menu. The ground floor would offer global street-food-inspired fare, and the top deck would be a champagne bar. He's crafting a ginger molasses cocktail as a wink to the storage tank once housed on the site.

He hopes the new restaurant will have a summer opening.

In the past, the pagoda has closed for the winter season because of low turnout, but Sly believes it could stay open year-round under Thomason's direction.

Jack Kavanaugh, president of the Freemason Street Area Association, said the neighborhood is eager for the reopening. Though weddings and other events with bands can sometimes get loud, the residents aren't concerned, he said.

"We all love it," Kavanaugh said. "It's our little place."

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