

Hard Rock park ready to roll

Construction to start this spring on new theme park

By Travis Tritten
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Courtesy rendering

A conceptual drawing of the entrance to the future Hard Rock theme park.

Myrtle Beach, prepare to be rocked.

Construction will begin this spring on the world's first Hard Rock theme park after financing for the \$400 million attraction was clinched this week, developers said Friday.

Plans call for amusement rides, a concert venue, rock memorabilia and a hotel.

The Fantasy Harbour park could be an economic boon for the area, producing an estimated 3,000 jobs, and will thrust the Grand Strand tourism industry into the international spotlight, local officials said.

Not everyone gave the proposed park a glowing review, however.

National amusement park analysts stressed concern about whether the park will be able to survive economically when visitor numbers slow during winter months.

As the Strand's oldest amusement attraction, The Myrtle Beach Pavilion Amusement Park, prepares to close, the Hard Rock project represents the area's changing identity and shift toward international visitors and a more stable year-round job market, area leaders and employment experts said.

If all goes as planned, the 140-acre rock 'n' roll theme park could open its gates in spring 2008, said Steven Goodwin, chief operating officer of HRP Management Corp. The park has been on the drawing board for years, and the county approved the development plan this summer. Now developers will have to follow that plan as they work out details of the park.

"Financing is complete. We have everything we need to build the park," Goodwin said.

Two Israeli firms invested in the project in December and Goodwin said the development group, which includes five local investors, sold the bonds needed to begin construction work.

"It has been a long journey," said Tim Duncan, a Myrtle Beach accountant and investor. "We felt like we would prevail because we felt like the idea was such a good idea."

Not just rides

The Hard Rock name, which was licensed to investors from London-based Rank Corp., has been successfully parlayed into casinos, hotels and cafes, but the themed amusement park will be a first.

Developers were tight-lipped this week about specific attractions. They did say state-of-the-art sound systems were designed specifically for the project and the park will hold a vast collection of unique memorabilia pieces from the history of rock 'n' roll including cars and oversized concert stage props.

"The groundbreaking park will reflect the brand's commitment to music, featuring six unique, custom-designed zones celebrating rock's culture, lifestyle, legends and irreverence," according to a news release Friday.

It could be the state's second amusement park. Gov. Mark Sanford said in the developer's release that it "represents the largest single investment in tourism infrastructure in South Carolina's history."

As the shovels prepare to break ground, the old image of Myrtle Beach as just a place to get a summer job or shag away the dog days at the Pavilion is evolving.

"It is a huge leap to go to the old rides and the Pavilion that have been here for my lifetime to a state-of-the-art, internationally known amusement park," County Council Chairwoman Liz Gilland said. "To me, it is further evidence that Myrtle Beach is changing radically and rapidly."

Worries for the winter

The tourism industry is still heavily dependent on summer drive-in visitors. The park is planned as a year-round attraction, closing only in January and February, and will attempt to draw visitors during a traditionally slow time for Grand Strand tourism.

The Hard Rock park could add to a new trend of visitors who come in the spring or fall and make shorter stays, said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

"It can serve to attract visitors who have not been here before and give visitors who have been here a reason to come again," Dean said.

Not everyone agrees with local expectations for the park.

"It is not a year-round market, and you don't get the snowbirds that early," said Dennis Spiegel, president of International Theme Park Services Inc., a Cincinnati-based theme park consulting company. "I think this could be somewhat questionable."

Meanwhile, Hard Rock is an internationally recognized brand name and the announcement of the park will essentially be a giant advertisement for the Grand Strand to enthusiasts around the world, Dean said.

That could mean larger numbers of a rare bird in the Grand Strand - the international tourist, he said.

"This is a major capital investment into the Grand Strand economy," he said. "A project of this size and scope is much like a gift that keeps on giving."

The estimated 3,000 new jobs also would bolster local employment and encourage more year-round work, said Charlie Haneman, area director of the S.C. Employment Security Commission and Coastal Workforce Center.

Coastal Grand Myrtle Beach mall and retail businesses around Myrtle Beach are creating jobs that do not depend on the seasonal tourism industry, Haneman said.

The building of the Fantasy Harbour bridge, expected to happen by 2008 or 2009, will offer another access across the Intracoastal Waterway in the proposed park's area.

Overall, the jobs would be added to an area that typically has the highest employment rate in the state during the summer months and remains in the top 10 during winter months, he said.

"Myrtle Beach is sitting in a very great area for job growth," Haneman said.

About the deal

Rank Group

Headquarters | London

Gaming division | The Rank Group Gaming Division represents over half of the holding company's operating profit and comprises three main activities: Mecca Bingo, Grosvenor Casinos and Blue Square.

Mecca is a bingo operator in the United Kingdom with 117 bingo clubs and more than 5 million members

Grosvenor Casinos is a casino business with 41 licenses under the Grosvenor and Hard Rock brands and 1.2 million registered members.

Blue Square is a United Kingdom Internet and telephone betting business.

Hard Rock Cafe International

Rank acquired all of Hard Rock during the 1990s and owns 120 Hard Rock Cafes and 13 Hard Rock Hotels and Casinos in more than 40 countries.

Headquarters | Orlando, Fla.

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