

By BETH PLEMING

Staff writer

Ghost Town in the Sky—scheduled to open May 25, 2007 — is well on the way to becoming a top North Carolina attraction once again, new owner Hank Woodburn said Thursday.

Details for the parks reopening were unveiled at the Maggie Valley Area Visitors Bureau annual installation and awards dinner by Woodburn, the keynote speaker. In the background, western music, including “Ghost Riders In The Sky,” played during his speech.

Initial renovations are currently underway on the chairlift, incline railway, roller coaster, the main street portion of the western town scene and Ghost Town’s ride selection, Woodburn said.

Towers supporting the chairlift have been “stress tested” for two and three person chairs, he said. “And they are as strong today as they were that first day” in 1961. Tests are now underway to determine the condition of the cables.

There will be fewer rides, Woodburn reported, but entertainment will still be provided by the famed, live action gun-fighters, can-can dancers and Indian dancers. There will be other forms of live entertainment.

All kiddie rides will be relocated to a single area, and the Heritage Town Square will remain the site for mining exhibits and a museum featuring the history of Ghost Town, he said.

Season passes — already on sale for a discounted “early bird” price — are being offered for the first time in the park’s history along with two additional ticket options.

The Heritage ticket — \$16.99 for adults, \$10.99 for children ages three through 10 — includes a ride up to Heritage Town Square by way of the chairlift or incline railway.

The Frontier ticket — \$26.99 for adults, \$18.99 for children ages 3 through 10 — includes unlimited access to all rides and shows.

There will be a huge emphasis on group sales, Woodburn said, and various incentive programs, including discounted tickets offered to students with good grades and perfect attendance and a preferred lodging partnership program that will feature package deals for hotel guests.

“We’re big coupon people,” he said, and we’ll be executing an “extremely aggressive marketing plan.”

That plan includes a newly developed Web site, ghost-towninthesky.com. Woodburn said the site “will knock your eyes out,” and will be paired with vibrant billboards and the distribution of 1 million brochures throughout North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Florida.

A business partnership program will offer discounted tickets to patrons of various businesses in surrounding states, such as Taco Bell.

Currently in the planning stage is a “Kingdom Bound” opening event — coming in August — featuring various christian music groups, Woodburn said he expects will draw “thousands and thousands and thousands of youth groups.”

Also, in lieu of the park’s name being “Ghost Town,” Woodburn said, park owners are planning a “big” halloween event.

Looking further ahead, Woodburn said future plans for the property may include some real estate development, “but it will not take away from the park,” he said, and the addition of an indoor water park. A log flume ride may be added as early as next year.

“We’re not only doing a great thing” at Ghost Town, Woodburn said. “We’re also

entering into a great partnership with Maggie Valley and businesses throughout the area. We plan on developing Ghost Town, preserving its heritage, bringing people back and lengthening their stay.”

Recalling his first visit to Ghost Town, Woodburn said he immediately recognized the tremendous value of such a place, to which he gave former owner RB Coburn credit for a “great, innovative concept.”

Then, he realized there was a lot of work to do.

“My word, what a great place,” Woodburn said, recalling his initial reaction to seeing Ghost Town. “Whoever did this was way ahead of their time. But my word, what a big job to get it back to where it needs to be.”

Woodburn said the plan is to begin where Coburn left off. “R.B. did a great job,” he said. “And we plan to continue that heritage.”

Reach Beth Fleming at 452-0661 ext. 115, or bpleming@themountaineer.com