

The Mountaineer

BACK WITH A BANG

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Beth Fleming

Today is the day.

The sound of gunfire will reverberate throughout the hills. Music will fill the saloons and music halls, and the dust on Ghost Town's Main Street will stir once again. The sleeping giant has risen from a five-year hibernation. Ghost Town in the Sky is open.

For nearly a year, the return of Maggie Valley's unique mountaintop theme park has been talk of the town. The enthusiasm is fully-charged. Business marquees have been counting down the days.

Rarely does one attend a meeting of town councilmen or tourism officials, or venture through Maggie Valley without running into hopeful mention of the park's return. Many are banking on the park's success.

Since August, when a trio of buyers operating as Ghost Town Partners, LLC-Hank Woodburn, of Adventure Landing, Peter Hairston, a venture capitalist and Allen and Carol Harper of Smokey Mountain Railroad-announced the park's purchase, rumor and speculation have circulated. Many have wondered, and in some cases doubted, is there enough time to pull it all together?

Yet despite a bewildering 'to do' list and an overwhelming list of chores, optimism throughout the community has stayed strong, expectations high.

Park officials, determined not to disappoint, have remained committed to their goal, even when it meant getting their own hands dirty.

In final preparation, work crews have labored around the clock to have the park ready for the guaranteed opening day. And now, million, endless hours of manual labor, countless gallons of paint and many sleepless nights later, the long-awaited and highly-anticipated moment of unveiling is here. Just as it was promised.

Today, Ghost Town Partners, LLC stand triumphant, not to mention very tired.

"We are exhausted," park owner Hank Woodburn said yesterday. "The entire crew is tired and there's still work to be done. We look forward to a completed project."

Woodburn, who himself has been seen moving dirt with heavy machinery and hanging chairs on the chairlift, attributes his unflinching perseverance to staying well-nourished.

"Smackers' food has kept me going," he said.

As for the long-awaited day, Woodburn said he's not sure what to expect, but he's ready, come whatever may.

"We're real excited about (opening)," said Woodburn. "We have no idea what to expect attendance wise, but we are prepared for a rush."

A work in progress

The park is open, but the work is not yet finished.

Visitors to the park this weekend can expect to begin the Ghost Town experience with a 14.5 minute ride up Buck Mountain on the two-person chairlift.

The incline railway will not be operable opening weekend, nor will the park's infamous mile-high roller coaster, the Cliff Hanger.

Safety remains the top priority and could not be compromised in order to meet the deadline, nor for any other circumstance, said Sales and Marketing Director David King. Additional time is needed to run safety tests.

All other rides will be up and running, King said, including the 115-foot high drop tower, Geronimo Drop, new to the park this year.

The incline railway will be ready early summer, he continued. Meanwhile shuttle buses will be used to transport visitors up to the park by way of Rich Cove Road.

The cliff hanging roller coaster will be in operation for the June 11 grand re-opening celebration, King said.

Lights, camera, action

Preparing to grace the stage of the Silver Dollar and Red Dog Saloons, a newly hired cast of can-can dancers and musicians have for weeks been rehearsing a new lineup of stellar performances.

Under the direction of Ghost Town Entertainment Director John Buccafusco, with the help of Entertainment Manager Robert Bradley, returning to the park this season as "The Apache Kid," saloon shows and gunfights have all been re-written to include more action, more plot, more audience interaction and more spontaneity.

Rick Youngblood will direct entertainment in the Indian Village that will feature drumming and tribal dances by Cherokee performers.

In between hourly saloon shows and gunfights, visitors will find plenty to do along the street of GhostTown's western town.

A stroll along Main Street will lead visitors to several cafe's, western wear and jewelry shops, the can-can candy store, the Copper Kettle Fudge Shop, an ice cream parlor, a toy shop, various museum-type set ups depicting life during earlier times and an opportunity to have an old-time family portrait made.

Stakes are high

Ghost Town's return is to be a dramatic turning point, a moment of re-awakening for an economy that many claim, has slipped into much slower pace since the park's closing in 2002. With the park's return, Maggie Valley is expected to come back to life.

Once close friends of park founder R.B. Coburn, Alaska Pressley, of Maggie Valley, and her then husband Hubert were instrumental to the park's founding in 1961.

She watched the park grow, fueling also the growth of the economy, and a business owner herself, she has felt the loss since the park closed.

Recalling the journey, Pressley said, she is confident the park, this time, is here to stay.

"I feel like, even 45 years ago, when the park opened for the first time, it was great and brought a lot of activity," she said. "Viewing it now, the park is much prettier, much nicer and very much improved. I feel the success of it is imminent...it was good then, but it's better now... there's no handicap in sight. I believe, it's definitely here to stay."

With all the right ingredients in place-strong management, aggressive marketing and quality product-there's no way for it not to work, she said. Add to that the impeccable timing of Ghost Town the movie's release, one week later, and Ghost Town's success seems certain, said Pressley.

"I've marveled at the way Hank (Woodburn, park owner) has gotten things done... I've watched it and felt like the management team that he (and other park owners) put together has been very professional," she said.

Furthermore, Pressley pointed out, in a world filled with so much filth and violence, Ghost Town in the Sky offers a refreshing alternative: good, clean family fun.

The addition of a family-oriented attraction will be a great asset to Maggie Valley, tourism authority Scotty Medford-Ellis said. "It gives us in the tourism industry another wonderful thing to offer people ... it's going to be more than just amusement, this is something we can offer to everyone. It's going to be great for families and children,"she said.

Although tourism numbers have remained flat since the park's closing, Ellis said, she expects to see occupancy numbers rise now that the park is open.

"It's a multi-faceted attraction," she said, "and in that case, the sky is the limit. We definitely don't know how many to expect, but there's no way it can't be a success... it's a win-win no matter what. I can say that in the absence of GhostTown, the phone

has continued to ring with callers asking about it... it definitely had a following even when it wasn't open."

In August, when Ghost Town opened to the public for a half-day event to officially hand-off the keys from Coburn to new owners, Ghost Town partners, LLC, a whopping 4,000 to 5,000 people showed up—a good indication that Ghost Town's faithful following of western enthusiasts have remained loyal after all these years.

Smackers' restaurant owner, Becky Ramey said she can testify first-hand to the community's devout interest in Ghost Town.

"Ghost Town has been a mystery to people for five years," she said. "People are so curious about what's going on up there; they all want to know what it looks like up there now."

Ramey who has served many meals up at Ghost Town during recent months, said she is often asked to "describe what it looks like up there." "People are still very interested... I am confident the park's return is going to put Maggie Valley back on the map ... I think it's just going to blow us all away."

Haywood County Economic Development Commission Director Mark Clasby seems to agree, although he said it is too early to calculate exactly what the impact will be, in terms of dollars.

Nonetheless, "it's going to be tremendous," he said, of Ghost Town's economic impact on the county at large. "When you consider they are hiring 230 to 250 full- and part-time employees and the purchases they, alone, will make from area vendors," and the service they will bring to area restaurants, not to mention the business that park visitors will also bring to the county, it's easy to believe the impact will be huge.

"Obviously when you add all that up," he said, "you can see that the impact on our community will be tremendous in a very positive way, especially in Maggie Valley, but also throughout all of Haywood County."

Off to a good start

Based upon early ticket sales, Vice President of Sales and Marketing Julie Dion said the park is already off to a successful start.

Hundreds of daily admission tickets have been sold to individuals, either in person from the A-frame welcome center or online, she said, and nearly 600 season passes. Pre-sold daily admission tickets may be used any time during the 2007 season.

"It's really cool that the community has embraced us so warmly," said Dion. "All over the region people are buying tickets, it's not just the locals... and we've been very impressed with season pass sales because no one has seen the park yet... they're banking on the fact that they are going to like it."

Woodburn said Internet sales indicate people throughout the region are buying tickets.

"Since we started our TV campaign, Internet sales have spiked pretty high," he said. "So there is a lot of interest not only in this state, but our season pass sales indicate, perhaps, a six-state area."

In August, 2,000 free admission tickets were distributed to individuals who were turned away from the preview event due to full park capacity; those tickets may be used any time before the end of June.

And approximately 3,500 daily admission tickets have been purchased by accommodation owners throughout the region, as part of Ghost Town's preferred lodging partner program.

More than 50 accommodations are listed as Ghost Town partners, meaning they have purchased park admission tickets to include in package deals or to sell to clients who want to avoid having to wait in line for a ticket at Ghost Town.

"Hotels and motels buy daily admission tickets in advance to use however they want. Many have included the tickets in package deals for overnight stayers, some use them as incentives, some are offering customer convenience, and some just want to be associated with Ghost Town," Dion said. "Many have already sold out of their initial supply and have already re-ordered more tickets."