



The roller coaster is the Boardwalk's most famous attraction

Boardwalk Boardwalk at 90: Blend of old, new

It's adapting for the future

By CATALINA ORTIZ
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SANTA CRUZ — Couples still push babies in strollers past hot-dog stands. Tan young people still play volleyball on golden sand. Kids still grab for the brass ring from the old-fashioned carousel.

After nearly a century, some things at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk just don't change. And that's the way fans like it.

"Santa Cruz has always been important to me. It's really the last traditional amusement park on the West Coast," said Dwayne Allen, a connoisseur and amateur historian of such attractions. "California used to be spotted with beach parks ... but this is really the last one."

It was in the summer of 1907 that the Boardwalk, along with a casino and ballroom, opened in this coastal town 75 miles south of San Francisco. The Boardwalk, a state historic landmark, celebrates its 90th anniversary when it opens for the season on May 23.

The family-owned company that runs the Boardwalk is determined to retain the rare, old-fashioned

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BOARDWALK

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atmosphere in which an 86-year-old hand-carved carousel spins to the accompaniment of an even older pipe organ and riders of the 1924 wooden roller coaster shriek with terror and delight.

But the Boardwalk also has been changing, in recent years adding chowder cook-offs, summer concerts and high-tech attractions in order to compete against other amusement parks, shopping-center arcades, VCR movies and video games.

"We are in competition for the leisure dollar. We've got to be creative enough ... to capture the interest of people out there," said Charles Canfield, chairman of the Santa Cruz Seaside Co.

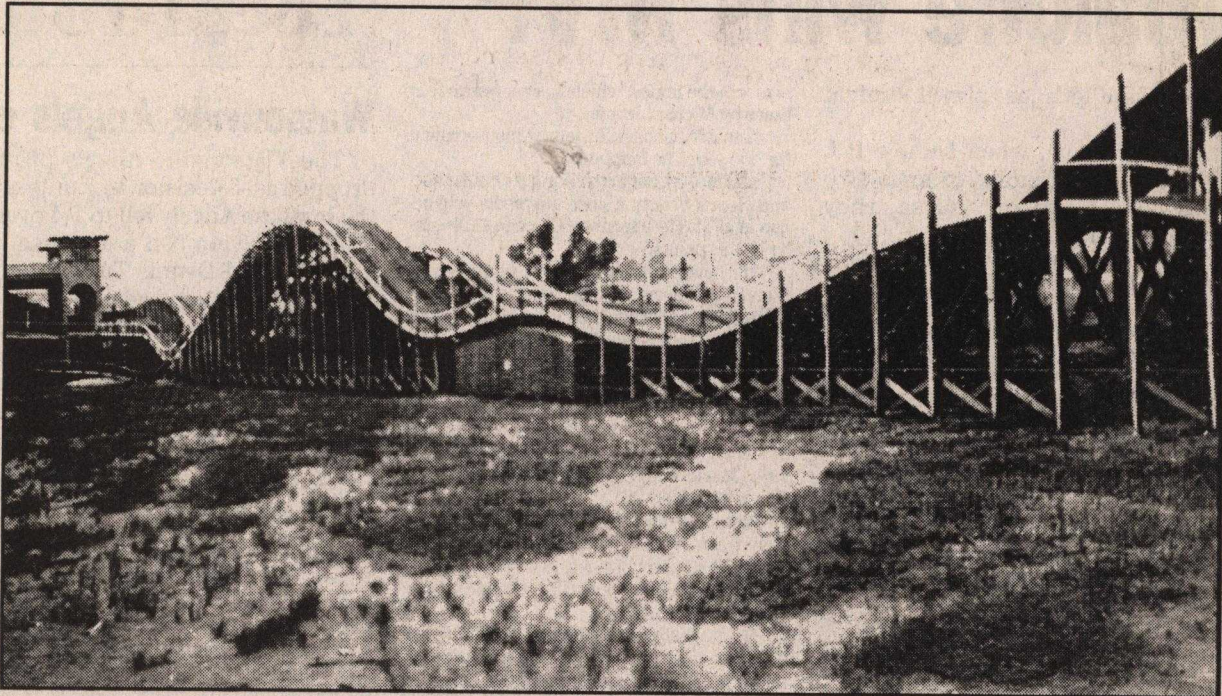
"We try to maintain our history — a melding of the old and the new," he added. "They key is having a nice blend of both."

Canfield also hopes the park can expand, adding new rides and parking, as part of an ambitious city project to revitalize the Boardwalk area and eventually integrate it with Santa Cruz's downtown.

The plans, to be the subject of hearings this summer, highlight the importance of the park to the city. While the city boasts a beautiful setting, a downtown rebuilt since the Loma Prieta earthquake and a major university, it's probably the Boardwalk that comes to mind when most Californians think of Santa Cruz.

The Boardwalk, the oldest amusement park in the state, opened in June 1907. It had a casino, ballroom and huge indoor swimming pool as well as an promenade where hatted gentlemen in suits could take the ocean air with corseted ladies shielded from the summer sun by parasols. The first ride, a scenic railway, opened in 1908.

Three years later, the park added its hand-carved carousel. The



Associated Press

In 1908, this roller coaster was an attraction at the Boardwalk.

Giant Dipper, a huge wooden roller coaster, opened in 1924 and has since carried more than 44 million riders. Both it and the carousel are national historic monuments.

Amusement parks went into a decline after World War II, when families moved to suburbs and television competed for leisure hours. So did the theme parks that spread in the 1960s and '70s. Since then, video and computer games have added their allure, and work has expanded into formerly free time.

But the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk endured. Aficionados credit several factors: local family ownership, incessant maintenance and the addition of such new attractions as laser tag and virtual reality games even as the Boardwalk maintains its classic feel.

"Santa Cruz ... is one of the last trips back in time," said Allen, a hardware store manager who lives in Foster City, Calif., and visits the Boardwalk frequently. "You can't beat the atmosphere and the setting."

Canfield, meanwhile, says the Boardwalk, squeezed on 12 skinny acres on pilings sunk in sand, needs room on "some good old dirt" for new rides. Someday he'd like to add a state-of-the-art steel coaster and a new water ride.

The city's initial plans likely would reroute a street to improve traffic and give the Boardwalk room to expand. They also are expected to replace an old apartment building the Santa Cruz Seaside Co. owns nearby with a hotel and conference center. Planners want to incorporate at least the Spanish-style building's facade into the new building.

Plans also call for replacing part of a nearby, largely run-down residential area known as Beach Flats. Some of the land, owned by the Boardwalk, would be part of the park's expansion. Other parts could become new housing.

Some Beach Flats residents, however, are wary, fearing that changes will hurt their neighborhood.

Most opposition so far comes

from longtime Beach Flats resident Phil Baer, who believes tall parking garages and expansion of the Boardwalk will further mar views of the San Lorenzo River where it flows into the Pacific next to the park.

"It's deserving of special protection, but I don't see it coming," he said.

But other residents and businesses on and near the Boardwalk like the changes being discussed. Merchants believe they will draw more people to the area in off seasons and encourage them to stay longer when they visit.

"I see the redevelopment as being almost a necessity. You can't expect to ... have everything stay the same," said Mathew Twisselman, who represents the third generation of his family to run food concessions at the Boardwalk and heads the Beach Area Business Association.

"In order to maintain something," he said, "you have to keep reinvesting in it."