



Amusement parks face new rules

Boardwalk 2-2349
Assembly measure requires periodic safety inspections

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LOS ANGELES — Permanent amusement parks in California, including the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, would undergo periodic inspections of rides, have safety training and record all on-site accidents under legislation proposed this week.

Currently the state enforces none of these conditions on permanent theme parks — only on traveling carnivals, bungee jumps and ski lifts.

It will be the second time Assemblyman Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, has introduced theme park legislation. The first time, in 1997, after a Northern California girl died in a water slide accident, it got stuck in committee.

But that was before a metal cleat came loose from a Disneyland ride and flew into a crowd last December. A Duvall, Wash., man suffered head injuries and died two days later. His wife and a park employee also were injured.

"Apparently the climate has changed significantly due to the recent accident on Christmas Eve at Disneyland," Gary Gartner, Torlakson's press secretary, said Monday. "There appears to be support for legislation."

"This may be the time where

people ... pull together and craft legislation that is effective and workable for California," he said.

Torlakson will introduce the bill in the Assembly this week, Gartner said. The legislator was expected to announce his plans at a news conference today at the Santa Monica Pier, which has an amusement park.

Boardwalk spokeswoman Ann Parker says the coastal attraction conducts 18 to 30 kinds of inspections annually on its rides.

A spokeswoman for the Seaside Co., which owns the landmark Boardwalk in Santa Cruz, said she had her doubts about the effectiveness of the proposed bill.

"Our basic concern is if legislation is done, it truly has to be oriented toward making a park more safe," said spokeswoman Ann Parker. "We're not sure if this one will."

Parker said the resulting law could create a false sense of safety if state inspections are done improperly or inadequately.

Besides, the Boardwalk already has a strict policy about inspections, Parker said. The coastal attraction conducts 18 to 30 kinds of inspections per year by its own staff as well as by various county and city agencies.

"We X-ray the Giant Dipper every year," Parker said. "Anything that the state would want to

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Amusement parks such as the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, left, would face greater state scrutiny in the form of safety inspections and other regulations under a measure the Assembly is expected to consider this term. The proposal was prompted by the recent death of a Disneyland patron.

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do as far as inspections, we are 100 percent sure we are already doing those inspections, if not more."

According to the California Research Bureau, California, eight other states and the District of Columbia have no laws governing the inspection of permanent amusement park rides.

In 1968, state lawmakers passed a bill that regulated amusement rides except those that are permanent. Since then, several legislators have tried to pass legislation to have that exemption lifted. Parks such as Disneyland lobbied against those bills, arguing they had their own safety procedures and shouldn't be subjected to more oversight.

In 1997, Torlakson's bill came one vote short and died in the Assembly labor and employment committee.

Now that Torlakson is reintroducing theme park legislation, Disneyland and other parks seem to have had a change of heart.

"We will work with Tom Torlakson or any other legislator or any other members of the industry if that's the case to help craft appropriate legislation," said Ray Gomez, a park spokesman. "It's something that our guests and public at large are saying would make them more comfortable in coming to a theme park and if that's the case then we're willing to support it."

Also in support is Jack Falfas, general manager of Knott's Berry Farm. That park, which also opposed state oversight in the past, was purchased by Ohio-based amusement park company Cedar Fair in late 1997. Falfas helped construct legislation to oversee parks in Ohio while working for the company.

"We have no objections to anything that might enhance our operations and we are interested in the opportunity to review any proposed new programs or procedures," Falfas said in a statement.

Timothy Chanaud, spokesman for Paramount's Great America in Santa Clara said he thinks the Christmas Eve accident at Disneyland made parks more aware of safety issues.

"The state inspection process would provide an extra set of eyes ... to work with us to ensure that we continue to provide a high level of safety."

Though the theme parks say they support "workable" regulations, Torlakson's bill can expect a fight in the Assembly, including from Assemblyman Dick Ackerman, R-Fullerton.

"I haven't seen the need that shows there is a great state urgency to get involved in regulating amusement parks," Ackerman said. "If you add another level of bureaucracy in California does that mean we're going to have safer amusement parks? I think the answer is no."

Sentinel staff writer May Wong contributed to this story.