

Boardwalk plunges into project

Entertainment center under construction

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A two-story miniature golf course with a lighthouse-shaped elevator looming over it are the linchpins of a year-round entertainment complex taking shape at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk.

The center, expected to be finished in May, also will feature a video arcade room, a billiard and games room, a snack bar, a souvenir shop and a restaurant with a stage area where animated characters will entertain youngsters.

Called Neptune's Kingdom, it's in the same building that originally housed the famous indoor pool filled with heated saltwater.

The so-called plunge building was built in 1907 and operated as a swimming pool until 1963, when Boardwalk officials filled it in and built a miniature golf course to keep pace with changing interests.

"We want to bring the building back," said Charles Canfield, president of the Seaside Co., which owns the Boardwalk. "It's innovative. I always like doing things that are different. (But) it's always scary spending the money we're doing and not knowing for sure the return you'll get on it."

The company is pumping about \$5 million into the project, which Canfield said will be the first step in keeping part of the Boardwalk open year-round.

Ed Hutton, executive vice president of the Seaside Co., said the project has been in various stages of planning for six years. It was on and off the shelf several times as Canfield wrestled with a decision on whether to invest the huge capital required to remodel.

"When he did approve going into this major, major project coming off the earthquake ... he was taking a major risk," said Hutton. "We're doing a high-quality attraction."

Hutton said he is confident the complex will do well during the summer, but the gamble is how many people will show up for games and golf on a winter evening in the middle of the week.

"We thought it was something that would be good for the area, and be good for keeping the Boardwalk open year-round," said Hutton.

Tentative plans call for it to be open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week during the winter. The summer schedule will tie into regular Boardwalk hours.

R & R Creative Amusement Designs created the plan, which will feature firing cannons, a mock diving bell, doors that look like they came off a Jules Verne submersible, a ghostly pirate ship, a fiery volcano, a huge mural and robotics throughout the complex.

"And don't forget, there'll be restrooms," said Ann Parker, publicity director, adding that people who regularly visit the Boardwalk often are more interested in that kind of news than anything else.

As the 18-hole course takes shapes inside, craftsman are working outside to re-create the ornamental castings that trim the ornate entrance to the other 1907 building, the Coconut Grove.

"Sometimes I wonder if we ought to have our heads examined," said Canfield about the expense of preserving history while keeping pace with progress.

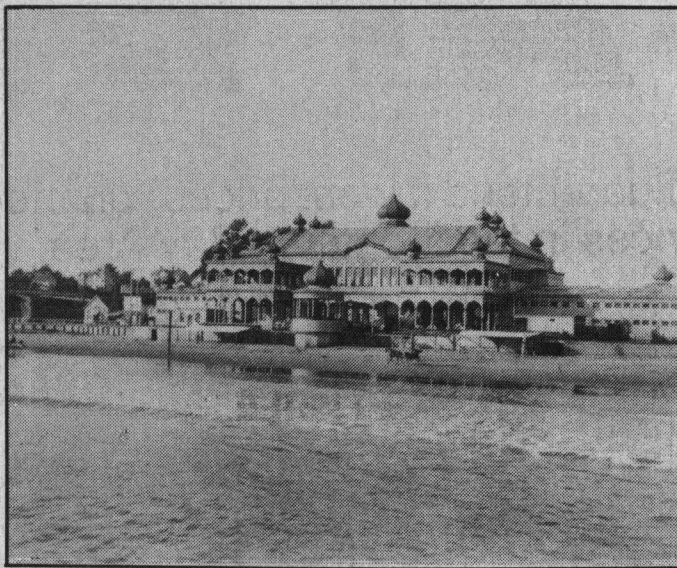
"No, no, no, it's worth it," said Parker as she looked at the old-fashioned castings being screwed around the second-story window of the building.

"Oh, I guess so," said Canfield, laugh-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Nautical theme, lighthouse will dominate Neptune's Kingdom, a year-round entertainment center.



Left, the Neptune casino in a 1905 photograph; right, construction crew poses in front of the project.

ing as he continued to tease Parker. "Especially when I see the finished work."

The nautical motif will include the old plaster of Paris King Neptune casting that adorned the outside of the plunge building (then called a natatorium) from 1907 to 1911.

It was exposed to the elements before owners built an addition and covered the old king. Canfield said that was a blessing in disguise, because if it had continued to be exposed "we would never have found it."

King Neptune was uncovered during construction work in 1981 and has been "floating around in the basement somewhere" ever since.

In fact, it was under glass in the basement beneath the Coconut Grove, and Canfield climbed onto boxes to clean off the dirt-covered glass for visitors to see the Neptune casting.

The work, being coordinated by Slatner Construction Co. of Santa Cruz, started in the months after the October 1989 earthquake caused part of the front wall of the building to collapse.

"We decided we might as well get going," he said. "We had struggled with this building for a long time."

Ideas on what to replace the "tired old golf course" with included another pool, an ice rink, rides, simulated attractions, movie theater and even a small water park.

"This is going to be first-class," said Canfield as he looked at the project finally taking shape. "I think this is a great business, and the part that's interesting is we're changing all the time. It never gets boring."