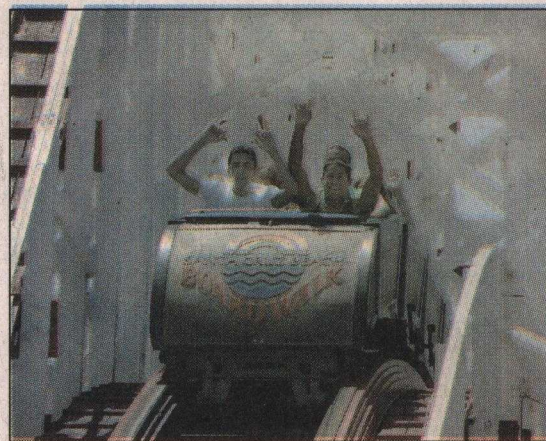


BOARDWALK AIMS FOR HIGHER THRILL FACTOR



Nick Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

The wooden Giant Dipper draws fans worldwide.



The Seaside Co. says the Boardwalk needs a 125-foot, free-fall thrill tower to compete with other area parks and to keep from going the way of other, now defunct, attractions.

Seaside Co. tries again for tower ride, scaled down from rejected proposal

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Boardwalk

6.6.03

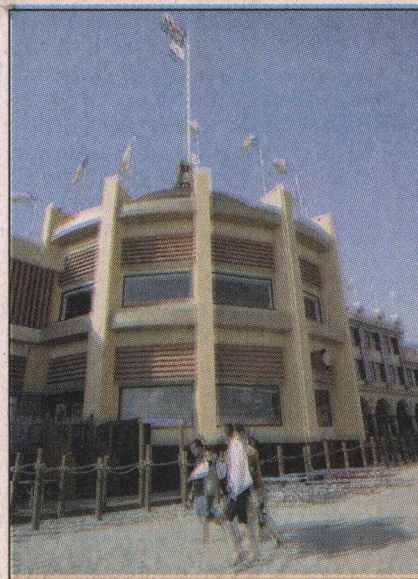
IN DEPTH
SANTA CRUZ — The last time the Boardwalk hyped a new ride, it was the Cave Train, a slow-as-molasses journey through a cavern full of dopey troglodytes. Times have changed since 2000.

Now the Seaside Co., owner of the Boardwalk, is competing with amusement parks pushing thrills to new levels. The Cedar Point park in Sandusky, Ohio, recently debuted the "Top Thrill Dragster," a 420-foot-tall roller-

coaster — 100 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty — where riders reach speeds of 120 mph. It's the tallest, fastest roller coaster in the world.

The Boardwalk has its own super thrill ride planned, though hardly as extreme. The Seaside Co. wants to build a 4-foot-wide, 125-foot-high "free-fall" thrill tower, and say it's needed to help the park evolve.

It remains to be seen if the tower will fly, considering Santa Cruzans drop-kicked a 1996



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Thrill tower

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version that was 60 feet higher and that drew intense opposition.

To build the \$1 million ride, the park needs approval from the city Zoning Board, and if anyone in the community appeals, it will go to the City Council. If all goes as planned, Seaside wants the tower up and thrilling in about a year.

Though the Boardwalk has a Looff carousel and the venerable Giant Dipper wooden coaster, built in 1924, other parks have scarier attractions to lure America's estimated half-billion annual amusement park visitors.

Demand for repeat customers, and obsession with "extreme" experiences, raise the stakes. According to ABC News.com, "even Walt Disney World, with its traditionally tame rides, has joined in the coaster wars with the Rock'n'Roller Coaster at Disney MGM Studios. The ride launches riders from zero to 57 mph in 2.8 seconds and spins upside down three times."

Increasingly, parks operate under the assumption they'll lose their shirts unless customers are frightened to within an inch of their lives. But most Boardwalk rides are of the tilt-o-whirl variety.

Seaside spokesman John Robinson said at a recent City Council meeting that many rides are "variations on spinning themes."

Considering the park's 5-acre "footprint," the com-

pany strategy is to build high and skinny. Without changes, Robinson said, the park may wither like Long Beach's Pike, San Francisco's Playland and Pacific Ocean Park in Venice.

Robinson insists the tower is of modest size, noting the industry height standard for thrill towers is 300-foot plus. "(But) I guarantee you, 100 percent, if you don't bring in new rides, you see a severe drop in attendance." The Boardwalk sees about 3 million visitors annually.

The ride would have 12 to 20 riders in secured gondolas mounted outside the structure, rising up, then coming back to Earth in a "controlled free fall." It would go up near the pirate ship.

Greg Carter of the Santa Cruz Area Chamber of Commerce hopes the ride is OK'd. He said it could draw more people to the park.

"They seem to be reaching out to the city with a proposal more in line with what the city asked them for," he said.

Will it pass muster?

Six years ago, a vocal group of residents opposed Seaside's 185-foot tower proposal — about 60 feet higher than the version now on the table. The city Zoning Board approved "Space Shot" as long as there was subdued lighting.

But that decision was appealed, with one resident calling it a "permanent blight on the horizon of Santa Cruz." Then-mayor Mike Rotkin, now a council member, got almost 100 calls in one week opposing the ride.

Things do change. The council last month was non-committal but vowed to listen with an "open mind." Rotkin this week said the economic conditions in the city have worsened to the extent more people may weigh the financial benefits than did in 1996.

He said he's "cautiously supportive, but I'm waiting to hear what the public says."

Reaction so far appears muted. Those who have spoken against the ride are largely the same people who, in the words of Boardwalk critic Patricia Matejcek, "threw a purple fit" in 1996. Matejcek said she fears birds will crash into the tower and die.

"Birds don't have bat radar," Matejcek said. "And what do we need this for?"

Todd Newberry, a biologist and birder who opposed the original tower, said a skinny tower reduces the diameter of surfaces a bird can hit, but "nearly ever tower that sticks up kills birds. It's a very well-known phenomenon."

Seaside maintains it will maintain subdued lighting at night during operating hours, and that the tower will be dark when the park isn't open. But Newberry likens a darkened tower to "driving on a highway and there's a telephone pole in the middle (of the road)."

Robinson calls the bird-crash arguments ludicrous, noting there are many towers in the area taller than the proposal, including 232-foot-high broadcast towers at KSCO in Live Oak. He said if birds couldn't maneuver around fixed objects, "there wouldn't be many birds left."

Rotkin called the bird argument "a little bit absurd."

How important are thrills?

The park's nearest competition is Paramount's Great America, which combines a family dynamic with thrills to grab customers. The Boardwalk says it gets more visitors per year than Great America, which won't release attendance records. Great America, however, works hard to make up for the fact it's in landlocked Santa Clara.

Its got white-knuckle rides for adults and adolescents, and SpongeBob SquarePants in 3D for kiddies.

Paramount also manages the 600-acre Bonfante Gardens in Gilroy, allowing the corporation to offer Great America attendees vouchers for free admission to Bonfante.

Nicole Koebrich, a Great America spokeswoman, said amusement parks compete against much more than just each other in the San Francisco Bay Area. She said the area is full of options, so "a theme park isn't always at the top of the list. We don't have the luxury of being at Cedar Point and having it be the main thing to do in summertime."

However, she said, parks get an edge when they add new thrills.

"Any tower sells because it's a cool ride," she said. "Stunt towers are very powerful. We try to always have something new. Every year we launch a new project."

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