

LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

CITY, BOARDWALK HAVE HISTORY OF UPS AND DOWNS

Boardwalk
EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is part of an occasional series examining the cultural, political and economic role of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, which celebrates its centennial this year.

By **SHANNA McCORD**
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SANTA CRUZ — Ferris wheel rides, first jobs for teens, Pac Man and Dippin Dots have drawn swarms of people to the Boardwalk during the past 100 years, and made Santa Cruz a premier summertime playground.

The amusement-park-by-the-sea, celebrating its centennial this year, is a giant asset to Santa Cruz as the city's No. 1 private taxpayer, a large employer and top draw for tourists.

"It's unusual to find a long-term, stable enterprise with the magnitude of the [Boardwalk]," City Manager Dick Wilson said. "We consider ourselves fortunate to have such a business for our tax base."

But the last century hasn't always been easy between the city and the family run Seaside Co., which owns the Boardwalk along with a bowling alley, motels and other residential properties in Santa Cruz.

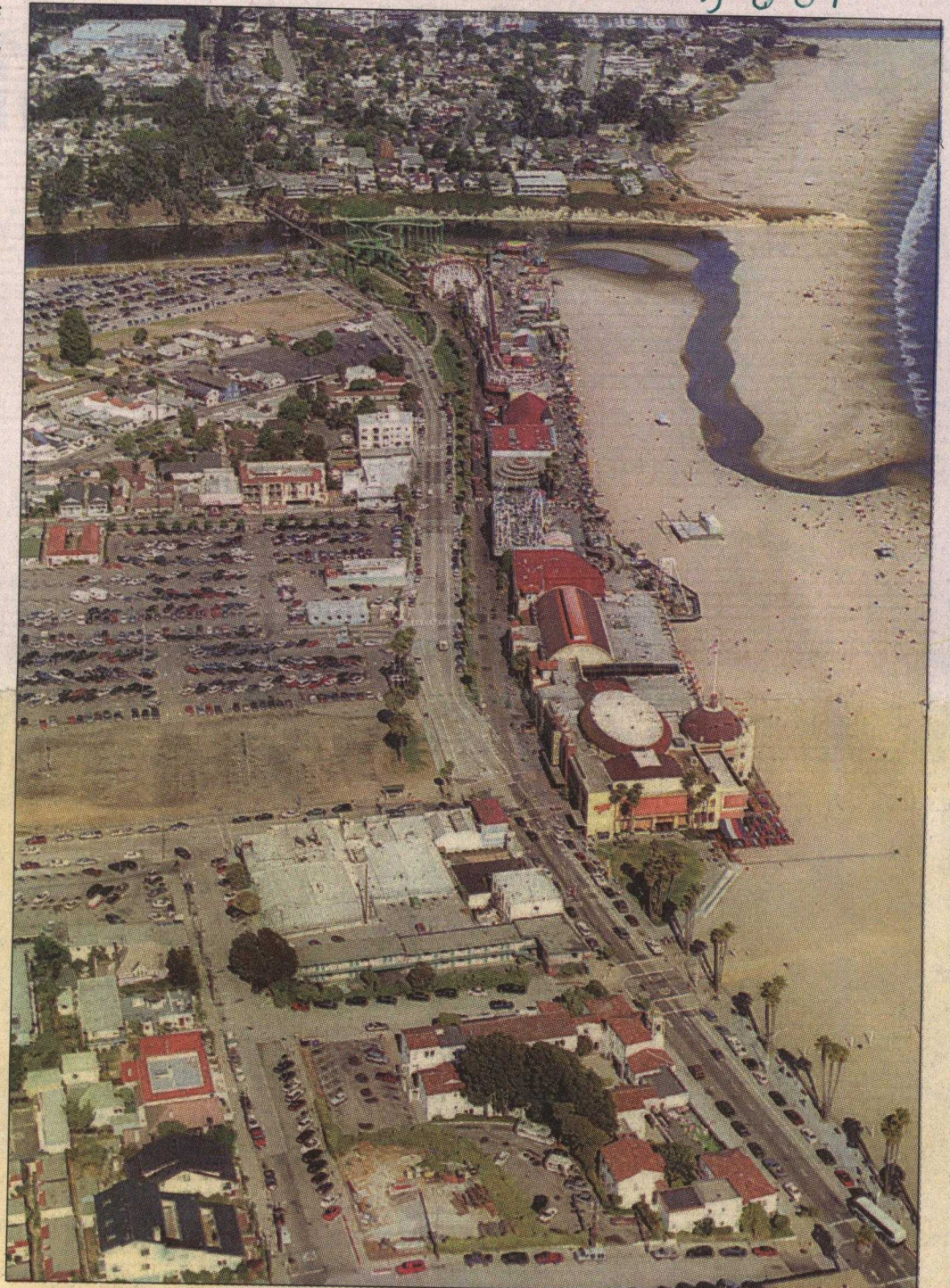
For example, there was a call in 1984 for a boycott of the Seaside Co. by a city leader leaning on it to unionize. And a former mayor once called Seaside Co. President Charles Canfield "Darth Vader."

Canfield has criticized the city, too, saying recently in an interview that the city "likes to micro-manage everything."

But the Boardwalk, born in 1907, has withstood scrutiny over the years by city leaders and local residents, upset by the traffic and crowds, who have fought to keep the Boardwalk in check by forcing limits on expansion, whether it's a hotel or new ride.

"You don't always get what you want in this town," Canfield said. "But you try to negotiate and

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The Seaside Co. has heard community opposition in the past for plans to expand the Boardwalk. The biggest beach-area project currently planned involves tearing down the La Bahia apartments, at the bottom right of the photo, and building a boutique hotel.

'It doesn't help that they have this anti-union attitude.'

MIKE ROTKIN, SANTA CRUZ COUNCILMAN

'You don't always get what you want in this town.'

CHARLES CANFIELD, SEASIDE CO. PRESIDENT

Boardwalk

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work within those parameters.”

Thrill of the big money

While the colorful, retro-style Boardwalk is a place many childhood memories are made, with a steady annual attendance of roughly 3 million since 2000, the institution is a big business that Santa Cruz depends on for financial survival.

Taxes paid to the city by the Boardwalk and its various concessionaires — including two Marini's candy stores, an O'Neill Surf Shop and multiple eateries — run about \$3.5 million a year, between sales, admissions and parking taxes.

That's about 5 percent of the city's general fund budget. Officials with the privately held company declined to reveal how much revenue it brings in.

Millions more in tax revenue comes from Boardwalk customers, who also spend money at other businesses like restaurants, gift shops and lodging. Surveys conducted by the Boardwalk indicate a third of its visitors spend the night and 10 percent visit Capitola.

“On the [Municipal] Wharf, it's huge. You can tell from all the people walking in wearing wristbands,” said Lou Caviglia, owner of Olitas Restaurant on the Wharf and Clouds Downtown. “Like it or not, the Boardwalk is Santa Cruz.”

On the job front, the Seaside Co. and its concessionaires, with 1,700 employees in the summer, are only behind UC Santa Cruz and Dominican Hospital in the number of people employed.

The Seaside Co. pays about \$19 million a year in wages and benefits, according to spokesman Kris Reyes.

“There's a huge advantage having the Boardwalk from a purely monetary standpoint,” said Wilson, Santa Cruz's city manager.

Touch and go

As much as the Boardwalk has been a steady source of revenue for the city, some say Santa Cruz pays a steep price for having a heavyweight commercial enterprise in a town where growth and big-box stores are generally unwelcome.

The wear and tear on city streets from the thousands of cars making their way to the amusement park, congestion in a beach area with relatively little parking, mass garbage pick-ups and the headaches that come with noisy crowds are common complaints.

City officials were unable to quantify how much additional police, fire and other public services are needed specifically for the Boardwalk. Officials say the beach itself garners much attention from visitors and requires a hefty amount of city resources, which is hard to separate from the Boardwalk.

The Boardwalk, which has its own security

team for curtailing crime at the amusement park, works closely with the Police Department, Sheriff's Office and District Attorney's Office.

“The Boardwalk makes every effort to mitigate any public safety concern that they may or may not create,” police spokesman Zach Friend said. “Not that much happens on the walk, but they often take the fall for what happens near them because they are a landmark.”

Holding on for a bumpy ride

Boardwalk officials say they strive to balance community concerns while working to stay attractive to guests. They say the dispute over installing the Double Shot, which shoots riders 125 feet into the air and back down, is a perfect example of the company's willingness to address residents' disapproval.

When proposed in 1996, the company was faced with appeals and community concerns that the Double Shot was too big, too much of an eye-sore for the Santa Cruz skyline. Instead of fighting for the tall ride, the Boardwalk went back to the drawing board and returned in 2004 with a shorter version more acceptable to earlier naysayers, though even then some complained that the ride was a danger to passing birds.

That's not the first time tensions came to a head.

In 1984, City Councilman Mike Rotkin suggested that the city boycott the Seaside Co., including not holding functions at the Cocomat Grove, because of a labor dispute in which Seaside workers lobbied for forming a union, which owner Charles Canfield opposed.

“It doesn't help that they have this anti-union attitude,” Rotkin said this week. “I'm not happy with that, but not enough to wish them ill.”

Tensions ratcheted up in the late 1990s over a plan that would outline future expansion and improvements to the beach area. The plan would have given the Seaside Co. an incentive to realign Third Street, build new housing in Beach Flats and improve parking and traffic circulation. A major increase in retail space and possibly a hotel also were part of the plan.

Canfield said the goal was to give the Boardwalk a “framework to work within” to improve the facilities and stay competitive with other amusement parks across the state.

Residents, however, were staunchly opposed to the proposal because of what they viewed as a cooked-up plan to line the pockets of the company. The tightly organized opposition claimed victory. A watered down version of the original plan resulted, giving the Boardwalk no room for expansion and few options for economic development.

Canfield said now every new project must be done on “a piecemeal basis,” which can be a long, slow process.

The Boardwalk, instead of sponsoring its own major project in recent years, has chosen to sit on the sidelines while other beach businesses have made pitches, such as the failed Coast Santa Cruz



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Teenagers play games in the Boardwalk Casino recently.

Hotel redevelopment plan in 2005.

The biggest beach area project now on the horizon involves tearing down the dilapidated La Bahia apartments and building a boutique hotel. The Seaside Co. co-owns the property with Barry Swenson Builder. Environmental impacts of the project are expected to be released later this month.

Here to stay

Regardless of its future plans, the company is a community stalwart.

It donates roughly \$100,000 each year to community causes, Reyes said, and is focused on recycling and cutting down on waste, ideals strongly promoted in the city.

Today, Rotkin still would like to see a more union-friendly Seaside Co., but refers to the business as a “model citizen,” noting their community contributions and providing late-night bus service for employees who live in Watsonville but don't get off early enough to catch the public bus.

“The fact of the matter is the Boardwalk is a clean, light industry by any definition,” Rotkin said. “They play the role of the local, homegrown business. They can't go to Taiwan and they can't run away like Texas Instruments.”

Canfield, who says he's developed more patience through the years when dealing with the city, acknowledges some people love to hate the Boardwalk, despite what it adds to Santa Cruz.

“If we decided to close this park up, there would be a great outcry,” Canfield said. “You're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't.”