

MERCURY

Boardwalk bucks the tide

Seaside park in solid shape as others crumble

By Bob Levy

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Amusement parks were once as much a part of the California beach scene as sand and surfers. They dotted the seashore from San Diego to San Francisco.

Today, only one survives — the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. It has outlived such famous coastal palaces as Playland at the Beach in San Francisco, the Long Beach Pike and Pacific Ocean Park in Santa Monica.

The 77-year-old boardwalk also has survived nicely, thank you, in the face of local inland competition from Marriott's Great America, Marine World/Africa USA and Frontier Village.

The latter park closed its San Jose gates forever in 1980. The other two are in a state of limbo thanks in part to less-than-spectacular balance sheets.

The continuing robust health of the Santa Cruz operation, which closes another successful summer season this

Back of Section, Col. 1

Money, geography have kept Santa Cruz park healthy

Continued from Page 1A

holiday weekend, raises a natural question:

Why has it succeeded where so many others have not?

Boardwalk officials and independent appraisers alike have the same two principal answers:

✓ Because a committed management has kept ploughing money back into the park, keeping it up to date and preventing it from becoming run-down.

✓ Because the unusual nature of the boardwalk property has prevented it from getting caught in the wild real estate spiral of the past several decades, even though it has a magnificent natural shoreline setting.

Here's Charles Canfield, president of the Santa Cruz Seaside Co., which owns the boardwalk. Canfield, 44, succeeded his father, the late Lawrence Canfield, who took over management of the amusement park in 1952:

'Real commitment'

"We're here because we invest a lot of money in the property. A lot of parks don't do that. . . . The problem in Southern California was that all of those places got kind of seedy. They weren't well maintained. . . . A lot of them could have made it if they'd committed the resources and been willing to make their parks safe and attrac-

stream of visitors to Santa Cruz.

Three years ago, a \$3.5 million renovation of the old Cocoanut Grove ballroom was undertaken. By the time it was completed, the price tag was close to \$10 million, according to Canfield, but the result was a successful banquet and convention facility.

"We're still paying off the bank, but it's going to work out OK," Canfield said.

Coincidentally, the Grove also has produced some of the most bitter strife the boardwalk operation has ever been involved in. A union organizing effort begun there last year stalled over contract negotiations and has dissolved into an labor-sanctioned boycott of both the boardwalk and the Grove.

Boycott

So far, according to Seaside Co. spokesman Glenn La Frank, the boycott has not affected boardwalk attendance, which is estimated at 1.5 million to 1.8 million a year.

Although the Seaside Co. regularly has put a lot of money into the boardwalk, it never has been in the position of being tempted to take all its money out.

That's what happened at other parks, where, as longtime boardwalk employee and historian Warren "Skip" Littlefield put it, real estate simply became "too valuable for hot dog stands and merry-



maintained. . . . A lot of them could have made it if they'd committed the resources and been willing to make their parks safe and attractive. . . . I just have a real commitment. I grew up here and started working here when I was 16."

And here's Terrence Cullinan, who works with SRI International in Menlo Park as an expert on the marketing of entertainment:

"They've kept the place in spick-and-span shape, which tends to discourage the riffraff. . . . If a place is clean and neat, people won't dirty it. . . . It's the carny atmosphere versus the Disneyland atmosphere. . . . Basically, they've had good, imaginative management."

New rides

Outward signs of that management abound at the boardwalk. This year, a new major ride, the Pirate Ship, was installed at a cost of \$350,000. When Marriott's opened its Great America in 1976, the boardwalk followed the next year with a new ride, Logger's Revenge, now one of its more popular attractions. Boardwalk officials insist that the presence of Great America never slowed the

walk employee and historian Warren "Skip" Littlefield put it, real estate simply became "too valuable for hot dog stands and merry-go-rounds."

While condominiums and other high-priced beachside developments were going up where amusement parks once stood in Southern California and San Francisco, the Santa Cruz boardwalk was feeling no pressure, Canfield said.

The difference, he said, is the Southern Pacific Railroad track that passes directly in front of the boardwalk property on the inland side.

Narrow property

Because of the railroad, Canfield said, "Our property is only 70 feet wide out there. If that track weren't there, there might well be other uses for this property than an amusement park."

If SP ever abandons its right of way, Canfield acknowledged, "we'd have to look at what we'd do."

"But we're not looking for that to happen. We're a healthy company, and we're continually working to maintain that health."



Charles Canfield, president of Santa Cruz Seaside Co., stands near boardwalk's new Pirate Ship

Staying healthy was something the three inland parks in Northern California could not do in the face of rising property values.

Frontier Village opened in South San Jose in 1961 and was doing reasonably well, according to Ed Hutton, who managed that park before becoming general manager of the boardwalk.

However, in the mid-'70s, Frontier Village's owner, the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, decided the park needed to expand to remain successful. When neighbors complained and the San Jose City Council refused to permit the expansion, the railroad threw in the towel and sold the property for development. Frontier Village closed in 1980, even though its last

two years were the best it ever had, Hutton said.

Land too valuable

The continuing Marriott and Marine World problems have become familiar to Silicon Valley residents. In both cases, the land became too valuable to support amusement parks. Marine World is scheduled to shut down Oct. 14 to be replaced by an office development, although animal lovers are asking that the closing of the Redwood City park be delayed.

Great America, after nearly being sold earlier this year to a private developer who planned to dismantle the park, was bought by the city of Santa Clara for \$101 million. The change to city owner-

ship — and management by an Ohio amusement park firm — has been scheduled to take place Tuesday, but there are questions whether the city can obtain financing by then.

Great America, in the eight years since it opened, has drawn from essentially the same population base as the boardwalk. Half the boardwalk's visitors come from the Bay Area and only 13 percent from Santa Cruz County. Yet despite Great America's extensive, modern facilities, its annual draw of 2 million visitors is not significantly larger than the boardwalk's.

No failure

Judy Hadfield, Great America spokeswoman, argued that the park has not been a failure.

"We entertained an average of 2 million people a year, giving them a value for their admission price," she said. "We simply have not achieved the level of income the corporation wanted."

Nevertheless, some observers noted that the boardwalk comes out on top of the Santa Clara park in several important areas.

One is price. It costs \$12.95 per person to enter Great America, unless you're over 55, when it's \$7.75, or under 4, when it's free. Parking is \$3 more. Once inside, the rides and shows are free.

At the boardwalk, executive Ted Whiting commented, "The entrance price is the same as it was 75 years ago: nothing." Rides range from 50 cents to \$1, and an all-day ride ticket is available for \$8.95.

Thus, a comparable ticket at the boardwalk is \$4 less than at Great

America. More important, said Dana Morgan, a former boardwalk executive who now manufactures amusement park rides in Scotts Valley, "If you want to bring grandma along, it's going to cost you another \$13 . . ." at some other parks. "At the boardwalk, you only pay for what you want."

Good location

Another plus for the boardwalk is location.

Bud Draeger was general manager of Pacific Ocean Park in Santa Monica when it fell victim to the real estate spiral. Now he's executive vice president of Arrow Huss Inc. of Campbell, another manufacturer of amusement park equipment.

Part of the reason for the boardwalk's success, Draeger said, "is the natural attraction of the ocean. People come for a day at the beach, and the first thing you know, they're up on the boardwalk and on a ride."

Perhaps the key difference seen between the two parks is commitment.

"When Marriott's came into the market, the boardwalk committed itself to competing the best it could," said Bill Bieberbach, an Orange County consultant specializing in the recreation industry. "At the same time, Marriott's was not as totally committed to amusement parks as it could have been."

Canfield confirmed that commitment, which his family has sustained for more than 30 years.

"The great thing about being in this business is that people come here to have a good time," he said. "It's a hell of a lot better being a bill collector."

Park has changed with times, but it's still amusing

By Dana Rubin
Staff Writer

The wooden slats of the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk have long since been replaced by a concrete promenade.

The hundreds of parasols on the beach are gone, as is the heated, indoor saltwater swimming pool once loftily known as the Natatorium, later as the Plunge. The graceful Victorian arches above the pool now tower over a miniature golf course.

But despite the alterations, some things never change at the boardwalk. Year after year, people return in search of the same kinds of pleasures that have made the sea-front amusement park the city's central tourist attraction since the turn of the century.

"I come here because I'm just a crazy kid," said Skip Haver, a 34-year-old elementary school teacher from Riverside who brought his family to the boardwalk last week.

"Every time we come up here, we always go the boardwalk because we like to act like kids, and this is the perfect place to do it," he said.

Emerging breathless from 68 seconds of tortuous travel on the Jet Star roller coaster, 25-year-old Debbie Ybarra offered a similar rationale.

"It's fun," she said, edging toward a nearby cheeseburger stand. "But to be honest, it brings too many tourists. It gets too crazy here. You get a lot of people from San Jose that are dirty — they leave their garbage and

stuff, you know."

In fact, many local residents say they stay away from the boardwalk during summer months, when crowds are thick, parking spaces are scarce and the noise level approaches a disquieting roar.

But starting Tuesday, the boardwalk will shift into low gear with its winter hours, closing down everything except the casino arcade games during weekdays. On weekends, from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., all 24 rides, 26 game booths, 15 food stands, 13 gift shops and five restaurants will remain open.

So will Marini's At the Beach, a family-owned candy store with hand-dipped chocolates, caramel apples and cotton candy. And, of course, a dozen kinds of saltwater taffy.