

The long view

Boardwalk



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

After more than 70 years, the lights are still bright on the arcade, and screams still echo from the Giant Dipper.

Boardwalk still drawing crowds

By CAROLYN STRANGE
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THE CROWDS have been coming for more than 70 years. Generations grow up, but they keep coming back with their kids and grandkids. Through ups and downs, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk has proved its staying power.

Built during the heyday of amusement parks around the turn of the century, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk is one of the oldest amusement parks in the country. It is the only seaside amusement park in California, having outlasted several other parks up and down the coast. Why has this one endured when so many others have failed?

Many factors have contributed to the continued success of the Boardwalk, says Ann Parker, publicity manager for the Santa Cruz Seaside Co., which owns and operates the Boardwalk. Successfully mingling the past and the present is one ploy that has paid off.

"The Boardwalk is an interesting blend of old and new," Parker says. In the Boardwalk's arcades, the most modern video games rub shoulders with vintage arcade machines dating back to 1898, she says.

THE OLDEST ride is the carousel, built in 1911 by Danish woodcarver Charles I.D. Loeff, who was one of the finest carousel carvers of all time. Only five other Loeff carousels survive in the United States. Each of the 70 hand-carved horses is worth from \$4,000 to \$12,000 Parker says. A 342-pipe organ built in 1894 provides music for the merry-go-round.

In 1924 Loeff's son, Arthur, built the most popular ride at the Boardwalk — the Giant Dipper. More than 34 million people have taken the half-mile ride. With its 70-foot drop and speeds up to 55 miles per hour, the Giant Dipper is still recognized as one of the top 10 roller coasters in the world, Parker says.

"Next year the Giant Dipper will be 65," Parker says. "That's retirement age, but it's nowhere near retiring."

The National Park Service named the Giant Dipper and the Loeff carousel National Historic Landmarks in 1987. Parker is gathering the paperwork to apply for California State Historic Landmark status

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for the entire Boardwalk.

Parker also attributes much of the Boardwalk's success to the Seaside Co.'s desire to keep it going. Several times it came close to going under. "They have put a lot of money back into the Boardwalk," she says.

THAT POLICY continues. The company spent a half-million dollars last year and plans to spend three-quarters of a million dollars next year. In the plans are a possible new major ride (with a price tag in the neighborhood of \$350,000), two new kiddie rides and an electronic marquee, with the letters set by computer rather than by hand. The firm also hopes to bring popular performers to repeat a summer concert series at the bandstand.

"Kiddie rides are small and fit almost anywhere," Parker says. But to put in a new adult ride, one of the present ones will have to go. Parker says they will replace a ride that is no longer popular.

How do they determine which rides are popular and which are not? The answer may be another clue to the Boardwalk's success.

"We work split shifts," Parker says. "So someone in administration is always here." Because someone is always keeping an eye on things, management has a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn't. And they don't just peer out their windows.

"Going out on the walk is a standard part of the job here," Parker says. It's the best way to see how employees are doing, to look at customer-employee relations, to size up which rides are being used and to just talk to people. The Giant Dipper is the only ride they keep an actual rider tally on.

"We've also taken some verbal surveys on the walk," Parker says, and roughly 90 percent of the responses were positive or very positive.

"Traffic and parking are a constant concern," Parker says of the main complaint in the surveys. But one man's major complaint was that the Boardwalk had no mechanical bull.

PARKER says various year-round promotional events have also contributed to the Boardwalk's success because they not only bring people to the park, but they help keep the park in people's minds. Nearly 20,000 people came to the two-day Eighth Annual Brussels Sprout Festival in October. The next event is the Seventh Annual Clam Chowder Cook-Off, scheduled Feb. 18.

Most visitors to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk come from a 150-200 mile radius, Parker says, but a lot of locals come, too. "It's a funny thing," she says. "People kind of complain about the Boardwalk; they say it brings tourists. Yet, it's one of the first places they bring out-of-town visitors."

The location is probably one the Boardwalk's greatest assets. It fronts on a city beach, which it sifts daily with machines to keep clean. In the winter, it's cleaned weekly.

Other amusement parks have been bulldozed to build condominiums, but the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk is situated on a very long, narrow parcel. As Parker puts it, "If the Boardwalk weren't here, what would be?"

Indeed. Generations of visitors probably can't imagine it any other way.