

## **Beach hopes for a hit**

Park's planners saw Strand as next Orlando

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To the people who have worked since 2001 to make Hard Rock Park a reality, the Myrtle Beach area reminded them of Orlando 25 years ago, with a beach.

The market's promise helped convince them that Myrtle Beach was ready for a theme park.

The \$400 million park, the first one with the Hard Rock brand, debuts Tuesday off U.S. 501 in Fantasy Harbour. The 55-acre park aims to attract up to 30,000 visitors a day during the summer.

The park was built without tax money or government bonds. So if, in the worst case scenario, the park is not a success, the area mostly stands to lose out on big dreams.

On the other hand, if it thrives, the hope is it will help catapult Myrtle Beach into a top-tier vacation and business destination, ushering in a new era that includes an expanded convention center and a bigger airport.

Park executives and local business and government leaders hope it will help attract international visitors, who spend more and stay longer than domestic visitors, and international investors hoping to piggyback on the area's success.

The park's three top executives - Steven Goodwin, Jon Binkowski and Felix Mussenden - lived and worked in Orlando before they migrated north. In Myrtle Beach, they say, they found a market that reminded them of Orlando before it matured into the theme park and convention mecca it is today.

### Resort resemblances

Twenty-five years ago, tourists drove to Orlando for the theme parks, but also to take in dinner shows and play mini golf, staying mostly at motels, two- and three-star properties.

When Orlando's Convention and Visitors Bureau formed 25 years ago in 1983, about 250,000 people lived in the three-county Orlando metro region, and its convention center - which opened that February - had about 250,000 square feet of exhibition space. It now has 2.2 million square feet of exhibition space, the second largest in the country.

In comparison, more than 230,000 people now live in the Myrtle Beach metro area, and the Myrtle Beach convention center has about 100,000 square feet of exhibition space, though the city is talking about adding 200,000 square feet by 2015.

At the time, Orlando had two theme parks - Disney World's Magic Kingdom and SeaWorld - and tourism leaders did not envision the theme park mecca that Orlando would become.

"I don't think anybody truly understood what was going to happen to this community," said Bill Peeper, who ran Orlando's Convention and Visitors Bureau from its inception until his retirement in 2006.

Instead, the leaders were focused on expanding the new convention center and building an international airport. Still, the theme park business helped drive the other business.

"Everybody kept an eye on the theme parks because they were the initial [demand] generators," Peeper said. "Everybody needed the parks to be successful."

Despite some early concerns from theme park owners, the convention business proved to complement theme park business, rather than eat away at it, Peeper said.

The high season for theme park businesses coincided with the low season for meeting business, he said. Plus, conventioners liked the idea that they could sneak out of the convention early and visit a theme park.

Myrtle Beach-area leaders say they hope Hard Rock Park will give people a reason to come here once - and come back.

"Once we get folks from away from here coming here for the first time, we've got them hooked," said Liz Gilland, chairwoman of Horry County Council, which approved the rezoning of the park property in September 2005. "They'll go back home saying, 'You won't believe what all is there and how little it costs.'"

### Fingers crossed

To be sure, growth is slow, and many factors go into raising a city's profile.

Sometimes - though it is rare - a city can look back and identify one thing as a turning point in its tourism industry.

For Branson, Mo., which bills itself as the live entertainment capital of the world, that time came after a dedicated segment on the TV newsmagazine "60 Minutes" in 1991, said Lynn Berry, spokeswoman for the Branson Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We saw a huge spike in the number of visitors," she said.

Myrtle Beach got its biggest time in the sun during the Republican and Democratic presidential debates it hosted in January. The city's name was all over CNN and Fox News, and the chamber is hoping a spike in visitor inquiries translates to a spike in business.

Hard Rock Park is also looking for free publicity in the form of media coverage, and many small news stories about the park - such as announcements of its concerts and rides - have made it to the biggest outlets in the country, including USA Today. Those tidbits could help push Hard Rock Park toward the top of family vacation wishlists.

Government and business leaders say the biggest challenge to getting there is getting people here.

Big initiatives include building Interstate 73, the Grand Strand's first direct interstate connection, which would lead straight from Michigan to Myrtle Beach.

Also, leaders say the area's ailing bus system must thrive so that workers from inland counties with high unemployment can make it to the beach.

The city is working on a plan to expand its convention center. The first phase would add 200,000 square feet by 2015, city spokesman Mark Kruea said.

A second phase would bring the exhibit hall to a half million square feet, though there is no time frame for that.

But convention and meeting planners consistently say an area must have direct flights from around the country to get business - and Myrtle Beach has fewer than its competitor cities.

The county has revived a plan to expand the airport terminal.

Myrtle Beach Mayor John Rhodes said he sees the comparison to Orlando, though he does not think the city will ever reach Orlando's mark of nearly 50 million visitors a year - more than triple the number of visitors the Grand Strand gets.

"It would be nice, but I just don't believe it's going to happen," he said.

### Attracting new blood

Local leaders have big plans for the Myrtle Beach area, including the expanded convention center and airport.

That all may happen without a theme park. But the hospitality industry - and all the ancillary industries that feed off of tourism in this area - is hoping Hard Rock Park could be a good start.

Myrtle Beach already has a steady and strong base of visitors; nearly 14 million people visit the Grand Strand annually.

But in the industry's estimation, Myrtle Beach must attract people who have never been here to grow to its capacity.

What really excites local business leaders is that Hard Rock Park - with the international strength of its cafe- and memorabilia-driven brand - has the potential to be the reason for new people to come from across the United States and abroad.

"Hard Rock Park investors, as well as the market in general, are counting on this to lure first-time visitors to the area," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. "For this to have the impact that everyone expects, it will have to."

Those new visitors will not just fill hotel rooms, though the lodging industry needs more guests after years of heavy building. They will also eat at restaurants, shop, golf and, sometimes, even buy vacation homes or move here permanently, tourism leaders say.

The magnitude of the park's influence will depend on whether tourists spend more in the area overall, rather than simply redirecting their money from other Myrtle Beach businesses, and whether locals go to their hometown park instead of other theme parks, said Don Schunk, a research economist with Coastal Carolina University.

Plus, the park plans to employ 3,000 people annually, making it the county's second-largest employer, behind Horry County Schools. Those employees will spend their money in the local economy, too.

"We all have a stake in the success of the Hard Rock Park," Gilland said. "Everyone who lives here or works here has a stake in the success of that park. We all need to be hoping and praying that they are wildly successful beyond our dreams."

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