

Posted on Fri, Mar. 20, 2009

Park's name not yet settled

Ad time short before opening

By Mike Cherney

mcherney@thesunnews.com

Officials with Hard Rock Park said Thursday they are close to resolving whether the park can keep the Hard Rock brand, but with only two months to go before it opens, theme park experts said the park faces an uphill struggle if the name needs to change.

"At least there is a certain level of awareness about Hard Rock Park out there," said Jim Futrell, the historian for the National Amusement Park Historical Association. "So if they all of a sudden change their name, they're going to have to start from ground zero."

Representatives of FPI MB Entertainment, the company that bought the \$400 million park out of bankruptcy in February for \$25 million, say they are confident their marketing plan will yield results. And many experts said the park can still succeed even if the name is changed.

"If I were going to bet, I would say yes it is - it is going to make it," said Bob McTyre, a principal at Apogee Attractions, a consulting and design firm. "It has great underlying value, they've got professionals that they're bringing in, and they've got a much better cash position now."

The park opened in April to much fanfare, leasing the Hard Rock brand for \$2.5 million a year. It closed in bankruptcy in September, having failed to attract the 30,000 people per day it said it would, and its previous owners said a lack of marketing dollars contributed to the downfall.

The new owners say they will open the park by Memorial Day, but they must first settle discussions with Hard Rock International on whether the brand can be kept. The company has agreed to destroy branded merchandise - \$5 million worth was left, court documents said in December - if the name is not kept.

"The status is we're getting very close," said Steve Baker, the president of Baker Leisure Group, the firm managing the park. "Hopefully we'll have something to say about it as soon as possible."

Meanwhile, the park has been working with other local businesses to coordinate marketing and attract tourists to the park who would come to Myrtle Beach anyway. John Stine, the director of sales and marketing for the park, said free or discounted tickets could be offered as a promotion along with room reservations.

The uncertainty about the name means the park has yet to roll out a marketing campaign of its own, but Stine said it was already working on where to place advertisements and will be ready to do so shortly after a decision on the name is reached.

"When you have a name in place, it certainly helps," he said. "What we're talking about right now is an experience that every member of the family will enjoy."

Although there is already awareness about Hard Rock Park, changing the name could help erase some of the negative publicity the park received during the bankruptcy, some said. The success of a new name will depend on the park's marketing efforts.

"Advertising, of course, is very important - and word of mouth in particular," said John Gerner, the managing director of Leisure Business Advisors, a consulting firm. "That begins with building credibility and comfort with the local population, which the previous operation really didn't work hard to do. This group really has to reach out to the community."

Brad Dean, the president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, said the park's new owners were quick to reach out to other businesses. The uncertainty about the name is a significant challenge, he said, but one he thinks the park, off U.S. 501, can overcome.

"One distinct advantage the park has is the location - being on the main thoroughfare into and out of the destination," Dean said. "Most visitors arriving to the Grand Strand will drive by the park one or more times, and that will certainly give them an opportunity to attract attention."

But Dennis Speigel, the president of International Theme Park Services, another consulting firm, said the location is actually a drawback: It's too far from the beach, where most of the tourists spend their time. Two months does not leave much time to promote the park, either.

"They've got to hit the grand slam home run - and they're two months away from opening and don't know the name of the park," said Speigel, who worked with some of the park's previous investors after it closed.

Park officials declined to say whether they had done any market research into potential new names for the park. They also declined to say how big their marketing budget was and wouldn't discuss the pros and cons of keeping the Hard Rock brand.

Baker had said the park would add a handful of children's rides to increase the park's family appeal and also reduce the ticket price, which was \$50, to between \$35 and \$40. He declined to add any more details Thursday.

"We've listened to some of the complaints from last season - there was not enough to do or it wasn't quite family-friendly enough, a little bit too Hard Rocky," Baker said. "When you take a look at what we're doing, we're trying to focus on something for everyone."

ONLINE

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Contact MIKE CHERNEY at 444-1765.

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