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Hard Rock Park season passes good for 2009; ticket cost to drop

By Mike Cherney

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The new owners of Hard Rock Park will let people who bought annual passes last year use them this year at no extra cost, and the single-day ticket price will likely be decreased from \$50 to between \$35 and \$40, the head of the company that will run the park said in an interview Wednesday.

Steve Baker, the president and owner of Baker Leisure Group, also said there could be a discount on admission for locals at the ticket booth. Baker's company is one of the members of FPI MB Entertainment, which was given approval from a federal bankruptcy court to buy the park for \$25 million.

The price of an annual pass for the park, scheduled to open Memorial Day weekend, would also be reduced from the \$150 initially charged last year to about \$75, Baker said.

Speaking a day after the bankruptcy court approved the sale, the price reductions are just one of several changes that FPI MB hopes to bring to the park. Others include ride additions, menu updates, heftier marketing and a better working relationship with the local community.

Baker said FPI MB could spend \$15 million on the park this year. Improvements include adding three or four children's rides and focusing on keeping the park's four major roller coasters open. Breakdowns plagued some of the rides last year.

Baker said the group also wanted to add more live entertainment, though probably not some of the high-profile bands, such as The Eagles, that played at the park last year. The group is still identifying exactly which children's rides it would add, and Baker said larger rides could be added for 2010.

In general, Baker said the park's new owners wanted to market with more local businesses and build a better community relationship than its previous owners.

"It's encouraging to hear that they've recognized the mistakes made by the previous owners and are reacting to that with revised pricing strategies, improvements, enhancements to the park, as well as reaching out to local residents," said Brad Dean, the president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

The previous owners' biggest mistake, Baker said, was the marketing strategy. He said they failed to build enough partnerships with local hotels and other attractions. The park's original owners cited a lack of money for marketing as one of the reasons for the \$400 million park's troubles.

"I think they counted on the Hard Rock brand to carry the marketing - that all they had to do was put the guitar up in the air and it said Hard Rock and that would draw people," he said.

North Johnson, the general manager of the Myrtle Beach Pelicans, said the organization is hoping to build a closer partnership with the park this year. "We think with the new group, the opportunities are endless," he said.

FPI MB is hoping to attract up to 800,000 visitors this year and to keep the park open at least through August. That equates to about 9,000 visitors a day, well under the 30,000 daily visitors the previous owners initially estimated would visit the park during the summer. "Overall, people complained about being done with the experience too quickly," Baker said. "If you're charging \$50, you really need to provide a three-and-a-half to four-hour stay."

Baker also said the park would hire 750 people, with hiring getting into full swing about six weeks before Memorial Day weekend, or mid-April. That's down from the 2,000 people the park's previous owners said they hired at its peak.

All the employees, Baker said, would be local.

"I've always said that marketing brings them in, but operations brings them back," said Baker, who used to work for Disney and Hard Rock International and whose firm has been involved in a dozen theme parks.

Still an issue, though, is whether the park will maintain the Hard Rock brand. Baker said FPI MB was in discussions with Hard Rock representatives about keeping the brand, and he said he was hopeful an agreement could be reached. The park's previous owners leased the name for \$2.5 million annually.

Baker said FPI MB would have a back-up plan for the park's branding for the 2010 season if an agreement with Hard Rock Park was not reached, though it would be difficult to rebrand the park for 2009.

Representatives for Hard Rock declined to comment on the negotiations.

Baker said FPI MB hoped to run the park for the long term and that its managers would be putting together a 10-year plan for the

park. The group intends for the park to be profitable this year, he said.

"Our message is that we're here to stay and we love this opportunity," Baker said. "Myrtle Beach deserves for this to be successful."

At least two other groups had expressed interest in buying the park.

The court approved FPI MB's \$25 million offer Tuesday, with the sale supposed to close no later than today.

Debbie Wilfong, a Myrtle Beach resident who purchased annual passes for her entire family last year, said she was looking forward to going back to the park when it opened. She would definitely go more frequently, she said, now that last year's passes will be good for the upcoming year.

"I was really just disappointed for the investors and for Myrtle Beach and the community," Wilfong said of the park's abrupt closing in September.

"I really wanted it to be a success for our area."

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