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Ghost Town work on schedule

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MAGGIE VALLEY — A crew of more than 100 people is busy at work every day at Ghost Town in the Sky, preparing to bring the derelict park back to life for its grand re-opening next month.

At the bottom of the mountaintop park, the main tower for the chair lift has yet to be erected. The ride area remains vacant, with only blank, concrete spaces where the devices will stand.

But, walking onto the main street of the park's Wild West town, signs of life begin to appear. Brightly colored signs read: Silver Dollar Saloon, Diamond Lil's. Inside, the smell of fresh lumber and paint.

While much remains to be finished, managers at the park are confident they will be ready for the May 25 scheduled reopening.

"We still have a lot of work to do, but we are ahead of schedule and feel like we're where we need to be," said David King, Ghost Town's marketing director.

Though most of the park appears a construction site today, King said they should be ready to begin training employees during the first week of May.

That means bringing in and setting up a dozen rides, finishing the

construction of a new restaurant beside the big roller coaster (formerly Red Devil, now renamed Cliffhanger, with a new coat of yellow paint) and installing a parkwide security system.

King points to the transformation Ghost Town's Main Street shops as evidence of their speedy progress. Just over a month ago, Main Street looked like a real ghost town, with many buildings suffering from leaky roofs, outdated electrical wiring and worn out, flaking paint.

Now, the paint still looks worn out, but that's by design as they've tried to maintain the look of an old Wild West town, while cleaning up and updating the facilities.

"It's easy to make something with paint look brand-new, but it's hard to make it look old," King said.

The new Ghost Town management is also putting some new ideas in place, like giving the shops on Main Street individual themes and merchandise.

Kevin Bailey, the park's director of revenue, said the shops used to stock all the same items, but now they will have one shop with toy guns and cowboy apparel for boys and jewelry and other accessories for girls.

"We tried to go back and retheme them so no store will have the same merchandise as another," Bailey said.

Also new to the park is a museum, featuring photos of artifacts of the park's history along with Wild West and regional history, a new restaurant with a deck overlooking the Cliffhanger and mountains, and an open air Cherokee Indian market where merchants from the reservation will sell their wares.

King said ticket sales so far has exceeded his projections, with a few people from neighboring states already purchasing season passes.