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Ghost Town comes to life

By Sarah Kucharski • Staff Writer

Once more, for the last time — Ghost Town has sold.

The announcement came Tuesday morning as regional economic developers unveiled plans for the Maggie Valley theme park to reopen in May 2007. Hank Woodburn, owner of Adventure Landing, which has nine amusement attractions in four states, Al Harper, owner of the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad, and Peter Hairston, an independent venture capitalist were expected to close the deal with Ghost Town owner R.B. Coburn Tuesday afternoon.

"We've been to this place before, and until it closes it's not a sale," said Haywood County Economic Development Director Mark Clasby. Still, Clasby said this deal was going to succeed.

Ghost Town, a mountaintop amusement park that once attracted tens of thousands of visitors to Western North Carolina, has been closed for four years. At least four other potential buyers have expressed interest in the park; however, a deal never was brokered. Coburn reportedly has been asking for \$7 million — \$2 million more than the park's collective tax value. No information was available regarding the final selling price.

Last year, Harper tried to negotiate a deal with Coburn but was unable to match his asking price, plus make the costly repairs the park needs to operate. Harper teamed up with investors Woodburn and Hairston to achieve the necessary financial leverage.

Plans are for the park to be reopened as an amusement park, featuring many of the original attractions and live-action shows that made the western-themed Ghost Town in the Sky a success for nearly 40 years. Harper, Woodburn and Hairston have invested earnest money to have all the park's rides such as the Red Devil Rollercoaster inspected, have developed a plan to bring the rides up to safety standards before reopening. The park's rides include some vintage, historical children's rides of which there are few remaining in the world, said David Huskins, director of Smoky Mountain Host, a regional tourism advocacy association.

Huskins has been working behind the scenes to ensure Ghost Town's future as an amusement park, making contacts and working assiduously to find people with the right resources. Harper, Woodburn and Hairston are the right people who've come along at the right time, Huskins said.

Harper owns not just the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad but also the Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad in Colorado. His company's railroads are among the nation's top five scenic railroads in ridership. Woodburn is a North Carolina native and graduate of East Carolina University who grew a Putt-Putt franchise into the family-friendly Adventure Landing conglomerate, which features mini-golf, batting cages and arcade games. Together the two are believed to have the experience to successfully resurrect Ghost Town.

Ghost Town's sale came as extremely welcomed news throughout Maggie Valley as the word spread Tuesday morning. Long-time resident and owner of Joey's Pancake House Brenda O'Keefe was nearly speechless when she heard.

"It's like being in a town of darkness and the sun just came up," she said.

At the Maggie Valley Area Visitors Bureau there were similar sentiments.

"We've got smiles on today," said Visitors Bureau President Teresa Smith.

In addition to reopening the amusement park, plans are to expand facilities for group outings and special performances, add historical and heritage-themed exhibits, and offer a wider variety of restaurants and concessions. Long-term development plans include the addition of a water park, retail outlets, condominiums and potential home sites. All in all the Ghost Town property totals 250 acres.

"We are thrilled that the infamous Ghost Town In The Sky has been sold. It has been a long frustrating five years for many in Haywood County," said CeCe Hipps, executive director of the Maggie Valley Chamber of Commerce. "Equally exciting is the expertise, experience, leadership and dedication that Allen Harper and his team bring to the project. This will be a big boost for the tourism industry in Haywood County."

Discussions are under way to cross-market the theme park with the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad, which has depots in Dillsboro and Bryson City, as well as with attractions on the Cherokee Reservation, located just over the mountain on U.S. 19.

"Obviously it will be a huge boost," Clasby said of the reopening's impact on the tourism market.

The reopening is expected to create 285 full- and part-time park-related jobs in addition to those relating to the park's construction and refurbishment, according to Huskins.

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