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Saturday, October 25, 2008

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Branson theme park closing

BRANSON, Mo. — The economic crunch has hit Branson with the announcement Friday of the closing of Celebration City. The theme park will close at the end of the day today, which is its last scheduled operating day this season.

In a news release, Herschend Family Entertainment cited "a shift in business strategy" in the decision to close the park on the western edge of Branson, but that it also is exploring new concepts for the site.

Celebration City opened in the spring of 2003 as a nighttime attraction that offered rides, games and family activities. Herschend Family Entertainment also owns Silver Dollar City, White Water and the Showboat Branson Belle.

"As with businesses across the country, we have had to carefully examine our future strategic plans," said Joel Manby, president and chief executive officer for Herschend Family Entertainment. "We need to make smart, forward-thinking decisions in a tough economic climate. HFE has operated attractions in

Branson for nearly 50 years, and our businesses there have continued to expand with the market growth.

"We are confident Branson will continue to grow as one of America's premier vacation destinations for the long term," Manby continued. "As we plan the redevelopment of the Celebration City property, we will focus on projects with strong appeal to new and returning visitors to the market."

HFE properties in the region employ more than 2,000 year-round and seasonal positions. Approximately 18 full-time positions are directly impacted by the park closing, and the company is able to find new roles for most of those individuals, according to the release.

Seasonal employees will have the opportunity to interview for 2009 seasonal positions at Silver Dollar City, White Water and the Showboat Branson Belle.

Among ideas being studied are an aquarium, other family attractions and a retheming of the current park as well as destination retail and dining.

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