

Property swap raises excitement in Branson

Silver Dollar City and Branson USA deal could bring new theater to town.

By Kathryn Buckstaff
News-Leader

BRANSON — A recent property swap between two Branson entertainment companies could be the catalyst for new tourism products, sorely needed to stay competitive, say industry experts.

The deal between the owners of Silver Dollar City and the Branson USA amusement park has set creative juices flowing on both sides of the bargaining table. The new plans also will employ a marketing style designed to appeal to a diverse audience.

Silver Dollar City officials say they are considering myriad ideas for the 110-acre amusement park they acquired about three miles east of their 1890s theme park. And Bob Wehr, founder of Branson USA, said he's excited about his plans for the property in the heart of Branson that he received in the November deal.



File photo

Bob Wehr is shown at his theme park in 1999.

Silver Dollar City's purchase of the amusement park included cash plus 2.6 acres south of the Grand Palace theater and 9.8 acres south of the Grand Village shopping center. Neither party would disclose financial details, nor would they provide details of their upcoming ventures.

"We literally are looking at options as we speak," said Silver Dollar City spokeswoman Lisa Rau.

The park will not open next year because of time required for re-development. The name of the park probably will change. Some of the rides may be preserved, but that could change depending on the theme, said corporate development manager Billy Ong.

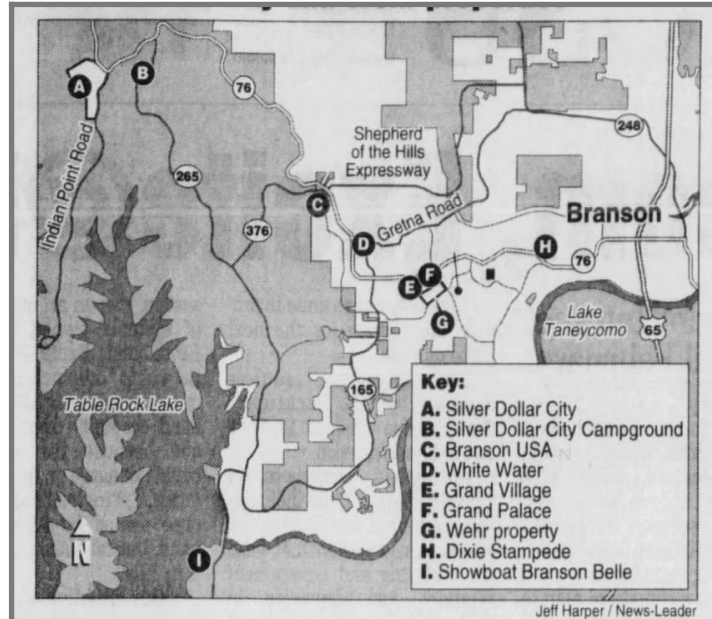
Wehr said he's planning to build a new theater and will announce details soon. The businessman who founded Aaron's Automotive Products in 1959 bought the Mutton Hollow Craft Village for \$2.5 million at a foreclosure auction in 1997. He added amusement rides and this year built a theater at the park he renamed Branson USA. That theater continues to operate with "The Magnificent 7" show under a lease from Silver Dollar City, he said.

"As time went along and we got the theater opened, I realized I liked the theater business better," Wehr said.

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Theaters in Branson have suffered a downturn of business in the past two years, but that doesn't discourage Wehr.

"My operation will be different, and I think I'll have an edge on it," Wehr said. "It might not be the most sensible thing to do, and a lot of people would think we might not need any more theaters, but right now we have too many old theaters where parking is bad, and we've got large theaters built by mistake."

New attractions are essential if Branson is to attract younger and more upscale travelers, said a recent city-funded study by the Harrison Price Company. In the past two years, the number of people visiting Branson declined, and in 2000, the number of first-time visitors dropped 16 percent.

Silver Dollar City's goal was not simply to buy-out a nearby competitor. It was the location and size of the relatively flat property that made it attractive. The deal came about through conversations and the development of mutual interests, Rau said.

In Branson, the company also owns White Water, the Showboat Branson Belle and the Grand Village. They are partners with Dolly Parton in Dixie Stampedes here and in two other states and Parton's theme park

and water park in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. They also are partners in Ride the Ducks, Silver Dollar City Campground and Talking Rocks Cavern in Branson West.

And Silver Dollar City recently announced a \$100 million investment in a new theme park at Stone Mountain Park, a state park near Atlanta now operated by Silver Dollar City.

A new theme park in Branson will complement other properties via package marketing, Rau said.

"It works business-wise and in the guests' favor to offer combination multiday ticket packages," Rau said. "You'll see it in many tourist destinations; for example, in Orlando with the Disney properties. They are all highly themed, but each offers a different experience."

Package marketing works well for families or couples where interests may range from a historically themed park to a water park to a boating experience.

"As Branson as a whole and Silver Dollar City become more sophisticated in our marketing, we will continue reaching further out bringing guests to the Ozarks," Rau said. "Adding attractions and active things for people to do can only make the tourist destination more attractive to a diversified audience."