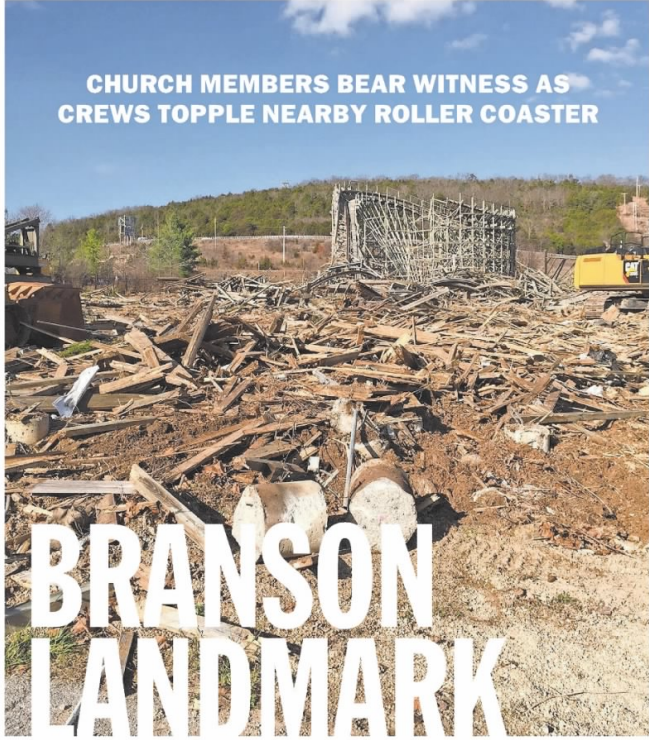




## CHURCH MEMBERS BEAR WITNESS AS CREWS TOPPLE NEARBY ROLLER COASTER

# BRANSON LANDMARK COMES DOWN

THOMAS GOUNLEY TGOUNLEY@NEWS-LEADER.COM

**B**ranson theme park Celebration City closed its doors in 2008, but the Ozark Wildcat — the park's erstwhile wooden roller coaster — kept a place in the hearts of members of the Woodland Hills Family Church even when its coaster trains were sold to Dollywood in Tennessee.

"It's just been our location marker for telling people how to get to what we call our castle," Ministry Director Denise Bevin told the News-Leader on Wednesday.

The first park on the site near the intersection of Highway 76 and Shepherd of the Hills Expressway had a short life; Branson USA opened in 1999 and closed in 2001. The next year, however, Herschend Family Entertainment — which owns nearby amusement park Silver Dollar City, as well as a host of other entertainment properties — pur-



ANDREW JANSEN/NEWS-LEADER

From left, Stephanie Watson, Andy Watson, Donna Seiler, Corey Mitchell, David Everson, Mickey Pitman and Denise Bevin, all of Woodland Hills Family Church, stand in front of what remains of the Ozark Wildcat roller coaster, which once stood in front of the Branson church.

TOP PHOTO: HERSCHEID FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

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## Coaster

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chased the property and redid the park completely for a 2003 opening. The theme of Celebration City was America in the 20th century; portions of the park were inspired by the 1950s, an old-time boardwalk and Hollywood filmmaking.

Starting around 2004, Bevins said, Herschend allowed Woodland Hills, a nondenominational evangelical church, to operate out of a 10,000-square-foot auditorium and 750-person theater in the park made to look like a castle. Setting up to worship, and breaking down afterward, came with a deadline. Services had to wrap up before Celebration City came alive in the evening and the space was needed for shows.

"We might be up here in the middle of the night putting things back up for Sunday," recalled Family Ministries Director Stephanie Watson.

The rush went away at the end of the 2008 season, however, when Herschend announced that Celebration City would not reopen in 2009.

"It was a favorite for many people, but it wasn't a very profitable park, and with the economy the way it was, we opted to close it," Silver Dollar City spokeswoman Lisa Rau said Wednesday.

Woodland Hills was allowed to keep renting the space even after the park closed, and the church now uses about five buildings. For years, the Ozark Wildcat coaster — known for being an unusually compact coaster, according to Rau — continued to loom overhead.

"There's not too many churches in an amusement park," Bevins said.

"The roller coaster is kind of our identity,"

"There's not too many churches in an amusement park."

DENISE BEVINS  
WOODLAND HILLS FAMILY  
CHURCH MINISTRY DIRECTOR

Church Facility Director Andy Watson added.

What goes up must come down, however, and this fall, Herschend began the process of demolishing the coaster.

When the park closed in 2008, Herschend said it was exploring various new development concepts for the site, including an aquarium, a rebranding of the park and destination retail and dining. Rau told the News-Leader on Wednesday that the company still considers the approximately 200-acre site a valuable piece of property but that it doesn't have a specific use for it in mind.

"It's still something in the creative minds of our people, but it is not anything that's in any stage of blueprints at all," Rau said.

So don't expect an immediate announcement regarding the future of the site, Rau said. The demolition is "merely part of the process needed to reclaim the land," she said, adding that moving the coaster wasn't an option. It just happened this year because Herschend decided to devote the financial resources necessary to bring the structure down.

"Something that people may not realize is that demolition is expensive," Rau said.

Demolition was a months-long process. The bolts were removed from the structure. Steel components had to be



ANDREW JANSEN/NEWS-LEADER

Crews clean up what remains of the Ozark Wildcat roller coaster that once stood in front of the Woodland Hills Family Church in Branson.

stripped. The actual collapse was scheduled for this week.

The church understands the decision to demolish the structure. But this was a moment to be recorded. So Corey Mitchell, creative director at Woodland Hills, set up a couple of cameras. The resulting video, posted to YouTube and the church's Facebook page Tuesday, shows lines tugging at one climb along the track. The structure wiggles, it resists, until the back-and-forth momentum is too much, and it topples to the ground — a thrill ride reduced to a pile of planks.

In the video's description, Mitchell wrote that the church's "beloved landmark met its demise."

"We hope you can still find us for church on Sundays."

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## Wildcat Comes Down

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