

Water parks ride a wave South Jersey is getting two indoor aquatic fun centers.

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Is South Jersey big enough for two indoor water parks?

A local builder and the owners of the Mount Laurel Marriott are each spending more than \$20 million to build competing year-round indoor water parks: CoCo Key at the Mount Laurel Marriott and Sahara Sam's in Berlin.

The people behind the projects say they are not worrying about the competition.

"When you take the population we have, two water parks are just not enough," said Ilya Girlya, finance director of family-owned Samba Construction Co. of Pennsauken. He is also heading a newly formed subsidiary of the company, H2O Entertainment Group, which will build and operate Sahara Sam's.

Girlya, a father himself, said he was inspired to build the park by the lack of year-round family entertainment in South Jersey and the rest of the Philadelphia area.

The park is an estimated \$23 million undertaking, encompassing 58,000 square feet. It will include numerous raft slides, a surfing simulation machine, activity pools with ropes and mini-slides and a retractable roof to improve ventilation.

Prices for admission will vary by age, but Girlya said a family with two adults and two children will be able to buy a year-round pass for less than \$600. Day passes will be \$25 to \$28 per person, he said.

However, William L. Haralson, president of William L. Haralson & Associates Inc., a New Mexico-based consulting firm specializing in theme and water parks, isn't so sure that Girlya's plan holds water.

"The concept that every other indoor water park in this country has followed is that you have to have a hotel with an attachment, specifically a separate attachment," he said.

Calling Sahara Sam's an "untested concept," Haralson noted that in the United States there is only one other indoor water park that is not associated with an adjacent hotel or resort, and it's in Anchorage.

CoCo Key's association with the Mount Laurel Marriott will provide a built-in pool of potential customers, Haralson said.

"It's a total experience - you come there, you sleep there, you eat there, you play there," Haralson said. "You can't do that with a freestanding water park. You're just not going to get people to drive 200 miles for a four-hour experience."

This doesn't seem to faze Girlya, who maintains that Sahara Sam's will benefit the regional customer who doesn't want to drive far to have fun.

"We're able to do things a hotel with a water park can't do, like offer yearlong membership," he said.

According to Girlya, "We cater to the community first," while hotel resorts like CoCo Key "cater to the community second."

Kate Bromley, marketing manager for the Mount Laurel Marriott and the CoCo Key Water Resort, is similarly untroubled by the prospect of competition from Sahara Sam's.

Calling the water parks "two distinct products," Bromley said, "I think competition is healthy and it will increase this area's exposure as a destination.

"I think both our projects will excel and give families a lot of choices."

CoCo Key, with a budget of approximately \$25 million, is part of a multimillion-dollar renovation by the Mount Laurel Marriott, which hopes to expand on its business-travel customer base. The park is scheduled to open in spring 2009, with both overnight visitors and purchasers of day passes able to enjoy slides, a dive-in movie theater - yes, dive-in - and a water playground complete with a 300-gallon tipping bucket. The prices have not been set.

"The water-resort industry is . . . growing very quickly," Bromley said. "Our goal is to make a local, affordable family fun destination."

While indoor water parks have been slow to catch on in the Northeast, they are a hugely popular attraction in the Midwest. In Wisconsin, the town of Wisconsin Dells, with a population of just over 5,000, has exploded as a tourist destination, boasting 19 indoor water parks, all attached to hotels, and the title of "Waterpark Capital of the World."

The town is also widely recognized as giving birth to the water park trend in 1994, when hotelier Stan Anderson saw his occupancy levels soar at the Polynesian Resort after installing a small slide inside the hotel's pool. A few hotels and resorts tentatively followed suit, and by 2002 there were 50 indoor water parks in the United States. Today, that number is around 170, with approximately 80 more parks under construction, according to an industry report by consultants Haralson and Jeff Coy.

There are two water parks in Pennsylvania, one in Erie and the other in the Poconos.

At first glance, the booming trend makes sense: hotels with a water park can often charge up to \$100 more per night than those without, and many families find this style of built-in entertainment a convenient way to placate cranky or bored kids.

"What's appealing to parents is that they know their children are in a hermetically sealed environment. Their kids aren't out in the parking lot being run over or kidnapped," Haralson said.

Chilly weather doesn't faze these guests, who can enjoy the perks of summer fun even in the dead of winter, and hotels can book rooms 365 days a year, not just during peak seasons.

However, construction for these attractions isn't cheap, nor are the maintenance and operating costs. Many resorts are constantly updating and improving, driven by the desire to add more and more square feet of water slides and wave pools. Wisconsin Dells' Chula Vista Resort is undergoing a \$200 million expansion.

Families with school-age children make up the bulk of customers, so water parks often see attendance drop when kids are in school. Hotels with water parks can try to compensate by adding conference rooms to attract business clientele on the slow weekdays.

Adding to the uncertainty of financial viability is the fact that few resorts report separate financial data for their water parks, which are treated as an extension of the hotel and its earnings.

This can make it difficult to account for profits, although Sahara Sam's consulting firm, Amusement Entertainment Management, is confident the business venture will succeed.

"Based on the demographics of the area, it will be a very strong performer," Jerry Merola, chief financial officer of Amusement Entertainment, said.

Still, time will tell if these two parks can manage to make a splash once they open.

"We were born here and raised here," Girlya said. "It's very important [to the family] that the community embraces this project."

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