



World's Largest Swimming Lesson celebrates 17 years, continues saving lives with forthcoming June 25 event

▶ **SEE PAGE 27**



More than three years in the making, Galacticoaster is the largest indoor coaster ever built at a Legoland Resort. COURTESY LEGOLAND

Legoland's Galacticoaster accomplishes its mission — in Florida and California!

ART Engineering delivers interactive, family roller coaster

AT: David Fake
dfake@amusementtoday.com

CARLSBAD, Calif. and WINTER HAVEN, Fla. — When Merlin Entertainments set out to build what it describes as the most technologically advanced ride in Legoland history, its project team landed on a manufacturer based not in a major industrial corridor, but in the quiet foothills of Germany's Black Forest. The choice of ART Engineering GmbH, headquartered in Kirchzarten, a small town southeast of Freiburg, to design and manufacture the twin Galacticoaster installations at

Legoland Florida Resort and Legoland California Resort says as much about that company's trajectory over the past two decades as it does about the increasingly competitive global marketplace for custom attraction design.

Galacticoaster opened at Legoland Florida Resort in Winter Haven on February 27, 2026, and at Legoland California Resort in Carlsbad on March 6, 2026, representing the centerpiece of Lego Galaxy, Merlin Entertainments' largest single in-park investment across its North American Legoland parks, a combined commitment of approximately \$90 million.

ART Engineering was founded in 2003 and built its early reputation on engineering work for established

European manufacturers. By 2007, the company was developing its first original attraction for a theme park; a year later, it shipped its first roller coaster to an American amusement park. In 2014, the company produced its first interactive coaster, and by 2016, it had sold its first dark ride, a Ninjago attraction, to Merlin Entertainments for the Legoland chain, beginning a partnership that would eventually produce Galacticoaster. The company opened a new headquarters in Kirchzarten in 2017 and continued to push technical boundaries, producing what it describes as the world's first Family Launch Coaster in 2021 and the world's first Wild Swing in 2022. Today,

▶ **See LEGOLAND, page 8**

Six Flags México home to newest Vekoma family boomerang coaster

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

MEXICO CITY — In 2011, Vekoma of the Netherlands struck gold. The introduction of the Family Boomerang was a direct counterpart to its best-selling Boomerang, which took riders forward and backward, as well as flipping them upside down six times. With more than 50 of the high-intensity thrillers sold, the family concept seems poised to have even greater success. Since the original Family Boomerang opened at Drayton Manor, the Dutch company now has more than 40 on the books in a mere 15 years.

Six Flags México is the latest recipient of this mid-sized gem. The installation, called Speedway Stunt Coaster, opened on January 31, 2026. Designed as a family-friendly introduction to coaster thrills, it allows kids and parents to ride together as they immerse themselves in the world of racing.

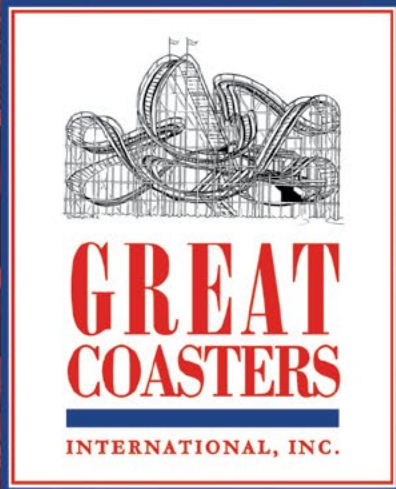
"Speedway Stunt Coaster has quickly become one of the park's standout attractions. Six Flags México is known for experiences that strengthen

▶ **See VEKOMA, page 10**



Fans of all ages can enjoy the forward/backward thrills. COURTESY VEKOMA





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AT NOTEBOOK: Gary Slade, gslade@amusementtoday.com

30 years ... where did it go?



Slade

This April 2026 edition of *Amusement Today* marks a milestone for the publication as indicated on our cover masthead with the number 30 appearing in our retro black and white logo (which salutes our beginnings and was created with the talents of Eddie Roseboom). It's Volume 30, Number 1,

and the beginning of our 30th year. In that span, *Amusement Today* has been honored to produce for you 393 issues in the first 29 volumes, totaling 19,300 pages. Issue #400 will be our annual Golden Ticket Awards issue! In that 30-year span, I've seen technology start moving away from flip phones, pagers and fax machines to email, websites and now everything from podcasting to live video clips.

The dedicated *Amusement Today* staff (present, past and those no longer with us) all made the pieces of this monthly puzzle come together; I was just the overseer of the final art masterpiece. I also want to thank YOU — our dedicated subscribers/readers — who continue to make us part of your regular reading. I don't want to overlook our advertisers, whose loyalty to AT keeps our staff in the field reporting on everything new in our ever-changing industry.

With this issue, AT has also shifted its section coverage to meet the ever-changing needs of our industry. Readers will now find these color-coded sections: Amusement Views (grey), Facilities & Attractions (blue), Business (green), Safety & Operations (orange) and the new Mobile Midways (red). This additional section gives the carnival owners, fairs and festivals their long-requested own section.

There has been tremendous change in how we report and produce the news for you in these last 30 years. Let's see what the next 30 years have in store! Perhaps a news hologram in the palm of your hand while riding your favorite amusement park ride awaits!

Cheers to these 30 years — and the exciting future that lies ahead!

FLINT'S VIEW: Bubba Flint



INDUSTRY VOICE: John W.C. Robinson, *Amusement Today*

Make the bet on yourself

As *Amusement Today* starts its 30th year of publication, one has to take a breath to realize all three of those decades happened because one man — Gary Slade — had the courage to bet on himself ... to build something he believed in.

It all starts with that dream, and then the courage to say, "I'm going to be the one to step forward and make that dream happen."

This industry is sincerely founded on that simple principle. My father bet on himself, and created the industry's first marketing firm that specialized in family-owned amusement parks. The Knoebel family bet on themselves multiple times, most recently with the belief that it could bring back the classic Flying Turns coaster. Will Koch did it with a vision of a family theme park far grander than his grandfather — and



Robinson

father — had ever dreamed.

Nearly every supplier on the showfloor at IAAPA Expo started with one person saying, "I have an idea, I can do this ... now watch me fly!"

That bet leads to innovation and dedication. Those, hopefully, lead to a first success and then another.

Suddenly, the company that was inspired by one person's belief in themselves is now poised to inspire the next person's innovation, the next person's cash-in on their own imagination and experience.

The scenic railway leads to the wooden coaster, which leads to the steel coaster, which leads to inversions ... and then powered launches, 4D, Axis coasters and more!

Find within you the inspiration, the dream that you know will take your world — and that of others — even higher! Then, push your chips to the center of the table!

Opinions expressed on this page are those of the columnist(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.



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Address: P.O. Box 5427, Arlington, Texas 76005-5427, USA

Deliveries: 2001 E. Randol Mill Road, Suite 109 Arlington, Texas 76011, USA

Phone: (817) 460-7220

AmusementToday.com, GoldenTicketAwards.com

Founder & Publisher

Gary Slade • (817) 460-7220
gslade@amusementtoday.com

Accounting & Classified

Sammy Piccola • (817) 460-7220
spiccola@amusementtoday.com

Advertising

John Robinson • (513) 256-1441
jrobinson@amusementtoday.com
Gary Slade • (817) 460-7220
gslade@amusementtoday.com

Editor & Production Manager

John Robinson • (513) 256-1441
jrobinson@amusementtoday.com

Editorial

Tim Baldwin • (972) 697-9745
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

David Fake • dfake@amusementtoday.com

Jeffrey Seifert • (817) 460-7220
jseifert@amusementtoday.com

B. Derek Shaw • (717) 843-3050
bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

Pam Sherborne • (615) 308-3310
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

Monthly Contributors: Bubba Flint, Eric Fluet, Ron Gustafson, Jack Lathrop, Susan Storey

Association Memberships: ACE, AIMS International, ASTM, IAAPA, IISF, IRT/IROC, NAARSO, NEAAPA, NJAA, OABA, PAPA, PACE, SLA, TTA, WWA

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2 MINUTE DRILL



AT: Tim Baldwin

DJ Vourderis, Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park

A New Yorker through and through, **DJ Vourderis** of **Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park** can boast playing the lead (Tony) in an off-Broadway play, "Tony and Tina's Wedding." Universally loved by all who know him, Vourderis was the recipient of the Golden Ticket Leadership Award as he steered his team through the global pandemic. He believes in the heart and soul of **Coney Island** and is devoted to family. His friendliness and welcoming hospitality are inescapable.

Title: Maintenance

Number of years in the amusement industry: 9 months before I was born, so when I turn 45 this June, it will be 45 years and 9 months.

Best thing about the industry: Spreading joy. So often we hear about how different we are, but our core values are not at all different. Everyone wants the same thing in life, to be happy. Our job sees humanity without a filter. People being social; not social media.

Favorite amusement ride: A Ferris wheel that has gondolas that swing like a roller coaster. The original one of those.

If I weren't working in the amusement industry, I would be ... I love to look up. At my job now I look up at lift hills and suspended gondolas. If I wasn't able to do that, I'd spend even more time looking up at the stars. I've always been fascinated by space, our place in the universe and its infinite possibilities. So, something in the space program.

Biggest challenge facing our industry: Climate change.

The thing I like most about amusement season: The hope it brings.

The food item at the park I'm more apt to grab is ... Hot Dogs! Mustard, no ketchup.

On average, hours of sleep each night: Five and a half to six, but working on getting more.

In a single word, my grandfather buying the Wonder Wheel in 1983 was ... Nuts.

The decade my kids would say defines my musical taste would be ... This is fun because I was a DJ back in the day — '90s for hip hop, '80s for pop, '60s and '70s for rock.



AT's Tim Baldwin (left) poses with DJ Vourderis while enjoying a visit at Deno's Wonder Wheel Park. AT/FILE

Favorite movie that featured the Wonder Wheel: *The Warriors!* And looking forward to Lin-Manuel Miranda and Eisa Davis (hopefully) turning it into a Broadway musical!

The most romantic country I have ever been in would be ... My wife and I went to New Zealand on our honeymoon, and that was amazing.

When parking my car at work, it ... Matches the color of the roller coaster it is parked under. I picked the car based on the color of the coaster. Because it's an EV, I use it to monitor voltage at that end of the park.

The thing the COVID pandemic taught me the most: To enjoy the little things more: a night out with friends, holidays with family, a hug.

My first attraction to ride at Coney Island was ... A Zamperla Mini Enterprise. When my parents got married, they used their savings and whatever gifts they got from the wedding to buy one.

Best Easter memory: Roasting a lamb on a spit (*Big Fat Greek Wedding*-style), under a roller coaster, as it was open and operating in full view of guests.

On a scale of 1 to 10, my love for New York is ... Beyond numbers.

Thoughts on the mayor's recent commitment to Coney Island: Hopeful. The mayor has shown so much interest in improving the area.

New York Mets tickets or Broadway smash? I met my wife while we were in an off-Broadway show, so I've gotta go Broadway all the way.

THE INDUSTRY SEEN

Star Lanes wins in Vegas



LAS VEGAS, Nev. — Star Lanes Polaris of Columbus, Ohio, accepted the American Amusement Machine Association's (AAMA) 2026 Family Entertainment Center Location of the Year Award during the AAMA President's Ceremony held at Amusement Expo in Las Vegas, March 18, 2026. Brothers Doug and Jeff Mechling, owners of Star Lanes Polaris, (shown above with consultant Jerry Merola of Amusement Entertainment Management, middle) began their journey in 2013, opening a 35,000-square-foot, bowling-anchored entertainment venue. "When you're the best at what you do, the world takes notice," commented Merola. "The amusement industry could not ask for a better example of a successful brand strategy, thanks to the commitment and resolve of Doug & Jeff Mechling." COURTESY AMUSEMENT ENTERTAINMENT MANAGEMENT

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Continued from page 1

ART Engineering's portfolio spans more than 211 projects across 15 countries.

Georg Behringer, who co-founded ART Engineering and serves as its managing director alongside **Oliver Pierling**, described the Legoland project as a natural extension of the relationship his team had cultivated with Merlin over the preceding decade. "Galacticoaster is a new, innovative highlight and a continuation of our long-term partnership with Legoland, which began with the Ninjago rides," Behringer told *Amusement Today*. "We are very proud of the successful implementation of these two rides and would like to thank the teams at Merlin, Legoland Florida, and Legoland California."

For Merlin's internal creative and project management division, **Merlin Magic Making**, ART Engineering's track record was a key factor in a competitive selection process.

"If you've ridden Ninjago, you've ridden on ART's work before," said **Blake Boyter**, senior project manager at Merlin Magic Making, who oversaw development of the Florida installation. "We interviewed multiple companies, but they were the winner for this one. They're a trusted partner. Our rides team, from a maintenance perspective, has a really good relationship with them."

What Merlin ultimately commissioned was a custom, one-of-a-kind track layout utilizing ART Engineering's Adventure Coaster model, the same vehicle system deployed on the acclaimed Primordial attraction at **Lagoon** in Utah. The signature element of that system is a set of independently, controllably rotating ride cars that seat four riders side by side, creating an experience that is simultaneously communal and unpredictable.

"The roller coaster ride, with its multiple launches and controlled rotating cars, combined with the space adventure theming, makes the ride a unique experience for all groups of visitors," said Behringer.

From Merlin's perspective, that hardware was



The Lego Galaxy land at Legoland Florida features a richly themed outdoor plaza anchored by Galacticoaster's Spaceport 885 entrance and the adjacent Orbital Outpost retail store (above left). In the ride's queue, guests can design their own spacecraft using touchscreens and RFID wristbands (above right), unlocking more than 625 possible ride combinations, before launching into a fully immersive, story-driven space mission. AT/DAVID FAKE



only the foundation. Boyter described a ride unlike anything in the Legoland system. "For us, this is a game-changing roller coaster," he said. "It's a high-speed launch with controlled spinning. It's a custom one-off track that's never been developed by anybody else. It was never even assembled until it showed up here."

Controls integration was handled by **Actemium**, working in close coordination with ART Engineering, while media and audio-visual elements, including the attraction's centerpiece character, Biff Dipper, the first-ever robotic Lego minifigure, were developed by **2Heads**.

Behringer noted that the collaboration between all parties was foundational to the project's success. "The collaboration on this project with all the involved teams went very well," he said. "Starting with creative sessions, a great ride with new features in ride and show elements had been developed and realized."

The guest experience at both parks begins well before riders ever board a vehicle. In the Briefing Room preshow, the animatronic Biff Dipper, built to 25 times the scale of a standard Lego minifigure, briefs incoming cadets on their space mission with characteristic Lego humor. Guests then proceed to the Customization Bay, where RFID wristbands and interactive touchscreens allow them to digitally configure their spacecraft across four build phases: nose, tail,

wings and a special feature element. With 625 possible configurations, no two missions are identical. Once aboard, the coaster reaches speeds of up to 40 mph across nearly 1,500 feet of track, threading through immersive lighting and cinematic sequences drawn from Lego Space sets spanning the brand's entire history, from classic 1970s playsets to present-day releases.

That depth of Lego brand integration was intentional and unprecedented. Boyter described visits to **Lego Group** headquarters in Billund, Denmark, during development, including early access to confidential product lines that were subsequently incorporated into the ride experience. "We actually co-developed this with Lego," he said. "We've never done such a tight integration to co-develop a ride like we did for this one."

While the two Galacticoaster installations share the same coaster hardware, ride vehicle system and core narrative, the surrounding Lego Galaxy lands at each park reflect the distinct character and scale of their respective locations. At Legoland Florida, the land occupies the former Flying School site near the water park entrance, with Galacticoaster anchoring a 30,000-square-foot building that rises more than 50 feet. The Florida attraction is the park's first new coaster since its 2011 opening and is also its first indoor coaster. The land also features the Junior Astronaut Training Zone for

younger guests and the Orbital Outpost retail experience.

At Legoland California in Carlsbad, Lego Galaxy spans 2.4 acres and marks that park's first new coaster in more than 20 years, as well as one of the most significant expansions in its 27-year history. The California land features the same Galacticoaster experience alongside the G-Force Test Facility ride, the Rocket Assembly Bay (a digital Lego building station where guests can scan and virtually launch their own Lego rocket creations), and a full suite of galactic-themed dining options. The California installation also includes the interactive stage show "Mission: Blast Off!" at the Fun Town Stage. Together, more than 583,000 Lego bricks are incorporated into the themed environments of Lego Galaxy at Legoland California, making it a showcase of large-scale Lego construction unlike anything previously seen at that park.

Fiona Eastwood, CEO of Merlin Entertainments, marked the Florida opening with a statement that captured the ambition behind the dual launches: "Lego Galaxy is more than a new attraction. It's an immersive world where kids take the lead in building their own adventure. By combining the power of imagination with the excitement of space exploration, we've created an experience designed to inspire the next generation of creators, explorers and dreamers."

Brian Bacica, president

of Legoland Florida Resort, echoed that sentiment at the Florida grand opening: "I'm incredibly proud to introduce our guests to Lego Galaxy and I can't wait for them to experience Galacticoaster, which is a first of its kind for any Legoland Park. Our dedicated team has put so much passion and creativity into this project that has been three years of planning, building, testing and dreaming."

On the West Coast, **Kurt Stocks**, president of Legoland California Resort, underscored the depth of collaboration that brought the project to life. "Over the past three years, our team has poured incredible passion, imagination and expertise into every phase of this journey, from blue-sky dreaming and design to construction and testing. We've also worked hand-in-hand with the Lego Group to ensure this new space-themed land captures the creativity, innovation and storytelling families love about the Lego brand. It's an absolute privilege to launch this stellar new adventure and share it with our guests today."

Rob Smith, COO of Merlin Entertainments, pointed to the scale of what the Lego Galaxy lands represent beyond just a new ride. "Lego Galaxy has been in development for the last three years as our team of Merlin's Magic Makers worked tirelessly to create a land that sparks the creativity and exploration Legoland Resorts are globally recognized for," he said. "We're especially excited about this expansion because it brings the Lego brand to life like never before — guests can design and ride their own spacecraft on Galacticoaster, and explore detailed, large-scale models built from more than 583,000 Lego bricks across this land that spans 2.4 acres."

Merlin Magic Making's Boyter, reflecting on the completed attraction, offered perhaps the clearest measure of what the project ultimately delivered: "Watching guests go on it now, it's just so cool to see them in their spaceship. That emotional connection — they got to build it, they got to see it — that's what pays off for us."



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Continued from page 1

family connections and create lasting memories,” said Humberto Garcia, Six Flags México spokesperson. “Speedway Stunt Coaster has thrills that the park is known for, while also allowing new adventurers the opportunity to step into the world of coasters. Now, the whole family is able to enjoy adrenaline-fueled fun together.”

To make room for the new attraction, Six Flags simply relocated a games area, which still operates nearby.

“This is our successful Rebound layout,” said Ricardo Tonding-Etges, sales, Vekoma. “One of the best things about this model is how compact it is while still delivering a big



Rising up the backward incline builds anticipation. COURTESY VEKOMA

punch. The park did have to shift a few things around, but in the end the layout fit the space perfectly.”

The inclusion of family attractions instead of continuous rides for thrill seekers has been a noticeable industry trend.

“Our Family

Boomerangs are absolute crowd-pleasers,” Tonding-Etges told *Amusement Today*. We have more than 30 running worldwide and another 10 on the way. They’re tall enough to look impressive (75 feet), fast enough to thrill (37 mph), cost-efficient (double-pass

track means less steel and construction), rock-solid reliable, and — most important — tons of fun. Plus, with a 38-inch height requirement, it’s often the first backward/shuttle experience kids ever get. It hits that perfect ‘family thrill’ sweet spot.”

The racing motif is a theme everyone can relate to.

“The whole theme is just adorable — racecar trains, a themed station and racetrack-style pathways tying it all together. It really brings the story to life,” said Tonding-Etges.

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Bolliger & Mabillard delivers latest ride for SeaWorld San Antonio

Barracuda Strike, family inverted coaster, delights guests of all ages

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

SAN ANTONIO — When **Bolliger & Mabillard** surged onto the industry scene in the 1990s, the Swiss firm made its first installation in Texas at **SeaWorld San Antonio**. During that time, the inverted coaster was the innovative attraction that theme parks were eager to get their hands on. Texas' first inverted coaster was *Great White*. Now, nearly three decades later, the manufacturer and park have created a sibling. Marketed as a family inverted coaster, the new attraction is called *Barracuda Strike*.

Whether it is water rides or kids' areas, the San Antonio park has invested heavily in family offerings in the past few years.



Riders pass through an abstracted coral "sculpture" close to the ground (above). Although there are no inversions on the ride, many of the wildly banked curves are forceful (right). COURTESY SEAWORLD; AT/JEFFREY SEIFERT

"It's always been about family, but especially this park because of just the conservation message, the education message that we always try to have," said **Jeff Davis**, park president. "Our goal is really for people to be able to come to SeaWorld and have something for everyone so that nobody in the family is going: 'I don't want to go there.' Whether it's seeing animals, whether

it's riding a roller coaster, whether it's riding one of our other rides or seeing one of our great shows, we really feel like all generations can come together and make memories."

Although the lack of inversions and the 42-inch height requirement lean into the family dynamic, *Barracuda Strike* still delivers an incredible amount of thrill. Part of that is owed to



its waterside setting. After climbing the 90-foot lift, riders plunge directly toward the park's central lake.

"Of course, being SeaWorld, we do everything we can to kind of incorporate water with our rides," said **Ray Gonzales**, director of marketing. "We're so fortunate at this park to have such a beautiful lake. Over the years, you've kind of noticed that we just continue to add things around the lake."

The park's **Intamin** jet-ski coaster, *Wave Breaker*, zips over the water, and the recent **Tidal Surge** addition, an **S&S** *Screamin' Swing*, swoops out over the lake. In the case of the new B&M coaster, support footings are poured directly into the lake so that riders' feet soar right above the water's surface.

When asked if building over the water creates challenges, Gonzales told

Amusement Today: "It was pretty similar to *Wave Breaker*. We had to dam our lake to lower the water to be able to put in the supports and beams for the coaster. With this one, we didn't have to close as large a portion of the lake as we did for *Wave Breaker*, but we still had to do part of it."

As much as the park is known for its rides, SeaWorld is also known for its animal interactions.

"With this new attraction, not only is it probably our most themed attraction that we have in the park — I'm sure you walked around and have seen the additions of reef rocks and fish, same thing in the queue line — but with *Barracuda Strike*, we were also able to bring in live *Barracuda* to the park, which is over at the aquarium," said

► See **SEAWORLD**, page 12



Barracuda Strike is the second inverted coaster from B&M at SeaWorld San Antonio. AT/TIM BALDWIN

 <p>Deggeller Attractions Preston & Barbieri Flying Swinger</p>	 <p>Preston & Barbieri Junior Coaster</p>	 <p>RES Rides Oracle</p>	 <p>Water Jumble</p>	 <p>IRG Intermark Ride Group TEL 615.370.9625 www.intermarkridegroup.com Fabbri Group Gosetto Preston & Barbieri RES Rides Moser Rides</p>
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► **SEAWORLD**

Continued from page 11

Gonzales. “Starting with the grand opening of the ride, people will be able to go to our Shark’s Pool Reef exhibit and see live barracuda for the first time ever at this park.”

Along with the themed and aesthetic touches, the coaster also features onboard sound, dramatically adding to the experience from dispatch to brake run. The ride’s queue also has ambient sound as people prepare to board.

The look and feel of the station have a sense of being below a pier. A sculptural school of fish swims below the wooden roof and above the heads of guests. A single train of 10 rows seats 20 passengers per cycle.

The B&M family inverted coaster is the third in a row that **United Parks and Resorts** has opened in as many as three years. **Busch Gardens Tampa Bay** opened Phoenix Rising



To ride Barracuda Strike, guests need be only 42 inches tall. Because of the new coaster, barracudas have been added to the park’s aquarium (below). COURTESY SEAWORLD; AT/TIM BALDWIN, JEFFREY SEIFERT



in 2024. Last year, **Busch Gardens Williamsburg** opened Big Bad Wolf: The Wolf’s Revenge. Of the three, Barracuda Strike stands the tallest, making it also the fastest. The Williamsburg installation last year had two lifts, making it the longest.

“We’re giving steps for children to enjoy rides,” noted Gonzales. “Last year, we built Rescue Junior, which had a new roller coaster. So now,

from Beach Rescue Racer, [kids] have the opportunity to go to Wave Breaker. And now they can come to Barracuda Strike. It’s a little more thrilling.”

Now with seven coasters, the park offers many levels of thrills.

“I think we’ve done a pretty good job, if I say so myself,” Gonzales told AT. “When they are ready, the younger ones can get on Texas Stingray, Steel Eel and Great White.”



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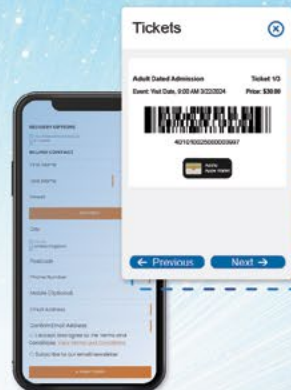
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Silver Dollar City's classic mine train Thunderation set to close

AT: Pam Sherborne

psherborne@amusementtoday.com

BRANSON, Mo. — After 33 years of thrilling parkgoers, Thunderation, the mine train roller coaster at Silver Dollar City, Branson, Missouri, will be retired at the end of the 2026 season. Since its debut in 1993, the Arrow Dynamics coaster has carried more than 27 million riders across more than 3,000 feet of track carved into the Ozarks terrain.

"It was not any one particular thing that resulted in this decision," said **Joey Thorsen**, director of content and public relations, Silver Dollar City. "At Silver Dollar City, we're constantly evaluating our attractions to ensure we're delivering the best possible guest experience both today and in the future. Those decisions are based on a variety of factors unique to each attraction, including long-term planning for how the park continues to grow and evolve.

"As time goes on, we begin to consider, do we reinvest in this ride or do we get something new?" he said. "We decided to invest in something new."

The park has faced similar moments before with its themed attractions.

"When Fire In The Hole reached a turning point,



Originally built by Arrow Dynamics, Thunderation's more than 30 year run will come to an end on January 2, 2027.

COURTESY SILVER DOLLAR CITY

guest research made it clear the story and spirit of that attraction were important to continue for future generations, which ultimately led to the creation of the new Fire In The Hole guests enjoy today," Thorsen said.

Details on the "something new" Thorsen referred to will be announced at a later date.

When Thunderation opened in the early 1990s, it represented a significant step forward for Silver Dollar City as the first major roller coaster. The coaster has a height of 81 feet and a maximum speed of 48 mph. There are 3,022 feet of track, including a 910-degree, double helix into a mine shaft. When it was opened, it was considered Silver Dollar City's first bona fide roller coaster and the start



of a legacy of world-class, record-breaking thrills.

"For more than three decades, Thunderation has created incredible memories for millions of guests and has become a beloved part of the park experience, introducing generations of families to roller coasters," Thorsen said.

The storyline of Thunderation's retirement follows the storyline of its creation, which is based on true events. "There was a real mining company here," Thorsen said.

And indeed there was. Silver Dollar City sits on Marvel Cave, which was originally called Marble Cave. After the cave was discovered in the 1800s, a mining company was formed and called Marble Mining Company. Explorers of the cave thought there was marble there. That endeavor lasted less than five years after no marble was found.

William Lynch and his family purchased the cave and, along with his daughters, opened it up to the public and began giving tours.

"In 1946, Chicagoans **Hugo and Mary Herschend** vacationed in the Ozarks and discovered the cave, now called Marvel Cave because of its awesome proportions,"

according to the website's historical information. "They loved the cave, which was run by Lynch's daughters. When the Lynch sisters decided to retire, they offered the Herschends a 99-year lease on Marvel Cave."

In April 1950, Hugo and Mary and their teenage sons took over the management and tours of the cave. That summer, Marvel Cave drew 8,000 visitors.

That was the beginning of Silver Dollar City.

The storyline of Thunderation is that there was one man who felt that there was still a reason to mine the cave. He went back underground and continued looking and mining.

Thorsen said many people still believe that part of the story.

The mine is still open for tours and Thorsen said it is huge.

"We can fit the Statue of Liberty in there," he said. "We have flown hot air balloons in there. Tours of the cave come with the price of a park ticket."

Thunderation's storyline continues with the retirement announcement. The press release that went along with the retirement announcement has the story going like this:

"The Marvel Cave Mining Company is taking back this section of the park for geological surveys, ordering Thunderation to vacate the tracks to make way for resumed mining operations inside Silver Dollar City. The mining company, which initially ceased operations in 1889, insists it is time to return to 'good, honest work underground' deep within Marvel Cave and that the rails currently occupied by the coaster must be cleared.

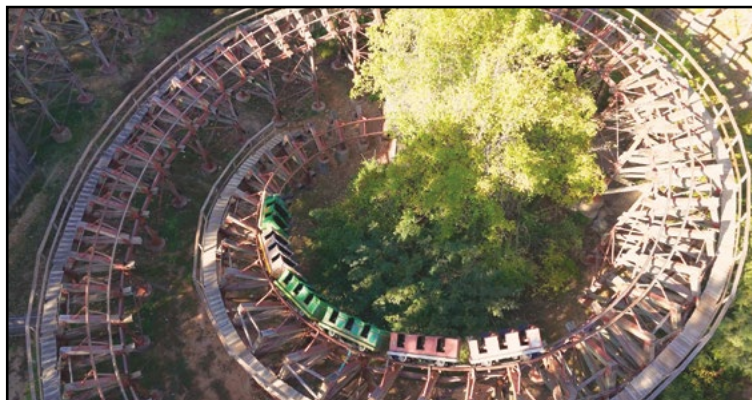
"Thunderation has had its run," said Foreman **Jedidiah Campbell**. "But this mountain was never meant to be borrowed forever. There are still undiscovered sections of that mine, and I intend to see what it holds. The work underground matters more than any cheer from above."

Silver Dollar City park officials have declared the 2026 season a yearlong celebration of Thunderation, beginning with an opening-day ceremony that occurred on March 13 and culminating in a final sendoff on January 2, 2027.

Park officials will be offering special ride moments, promotional offers, commemorative merchandise and limited-time offerings, unveiling those throughout the season.

In the announcement of Thunderation's retirement, **Silver Dollar City Parks and Resorts** President **Brad Thomas** said: "Thunderation's opening kickstarted exciting additions to Silver Dollar City. Likewise, Thunderation's retirement at the end of 2026 will launch new and exciting chapters in Silver Dollar City's future. In this case, the end is really an exciting beginning." "Ily an exciting beginning."

●silverdollarcity.com



The ride features 3,022 feet of track, including a 910-degree, double helix into a mine shaft. COURTESY SILVER DOLLAR CITY

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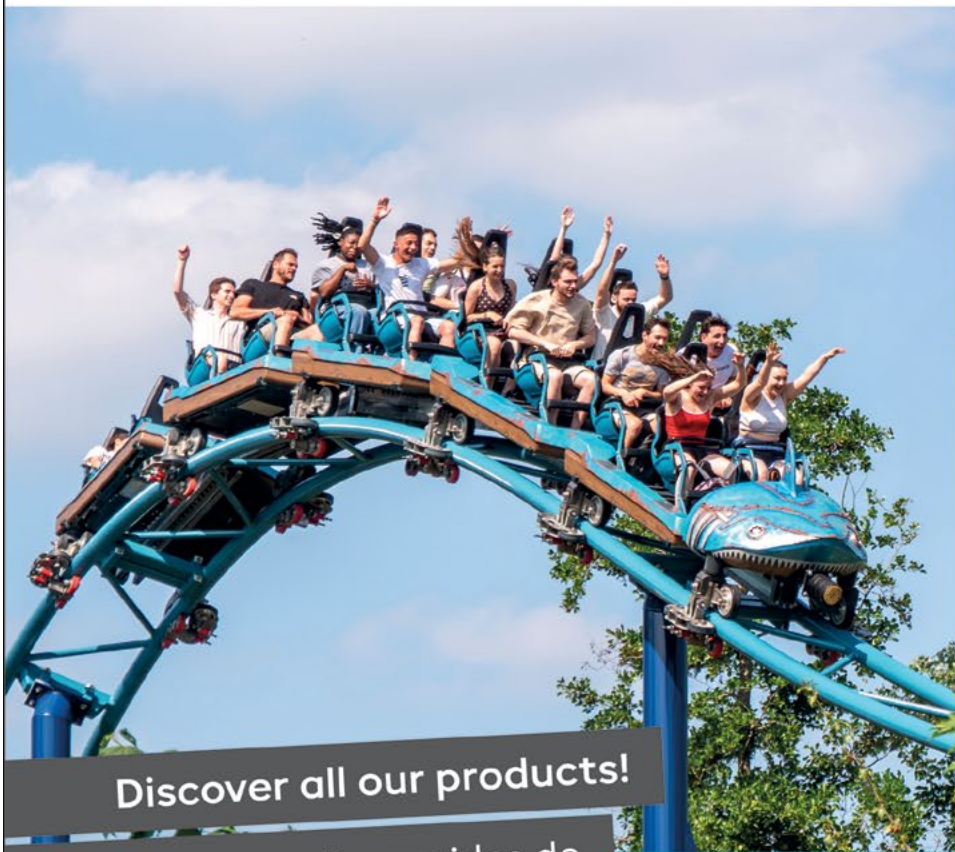


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Palace Playland acquires Zamperla family steel coaster

OLD ORCHARD BEACH, Maine — **Palace Playland** has added a family steel roller coaster to its arsenal of rides for the 2026 season, according to **Paul Golder**, the park's vice president of operations.

The Matterhorn Mining Company coaster, which operated at **Edaville Family Theme Park**, Carver, Massachusetts, was acquired by Palace Playland after many of Edaville's rides and attractions were auctioned in April of 2025.

The coaster has been erected at Palace Playland after going through refurbishment at an outside firm and will be operational for the park's 2026 season, Golder said.

Manufactured by **Zamperla** of Italy, the ride stands 30 feet tall with a track length of 574 feet. The coaster, to be dubbed **Gold Rush** at Palace Playland, soars around a spiral before hitting the brake and returning to the station. A single six-car train accommodates 24 passengers.

Palace Playland's rides are slated to open May 23, with indoor arcade operations starting April 17.

—Ron Gustafson



Palace Playland has erected the steel coaster acquired from the former Edaville Family Theme Park. The ride will be operational for the 2026 season. COURTESY PALACE PLAYLAND

Congo Falls, world's largest gorilla habitat, bolsters San Antonio Zoo

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

SAN ANTONIO — Gorillas are back!

San Antonio residents have not seen gorillas at their zoo for decades, but the **San Antonio Zoo** has made a bold move for the facility.

"We opened Congo Falls to the public on December 13. We saw a record, the biggest December we'd ever seen in history," said **Tim Morrow**, CEO. "We were like most of the attractions in the country — behind all year, trying to play catch-up. We stayed as close as we could to our attendance goal, but those last two weeks of December helped us exceed our goal."

Success didn't stop there. 2026 began with a record attendance in January, and that included some seriously cold weather that closed the zoo for a few days.

"With spring break coming up and a nice summer ... if we get good weather, this is going to be a really great attraction to draw people to San Antonio and the zoo," Morrow told *Amusement Today* in February.

The name of the exhibit is Congo Falls, and it contains three sections. Two groups of gorillas inhabit Congo Falls, and they are kept separate for breeding reasons. It is the world's largest gorilla habitat in a zoo. Currently, there are seven gorilla residents.

One section is particularly impressive with waterfalls, ropes, trees and a record-setting tower standing 70 feet



The entrance to Congo Falls is heavily themed (above). The two-acre habitat (right) allows for roaming and exploration. COURTESY SAN ANTONIO ZOO; AT/TIM BALDWIN



tall. Interestingly, because of its hillside position, the tower offers gorillas long vistas, including downtown San Antonio. The expansive area captures the essence of Central Africa's rainforests. The rock work was created by **Edge**, who also worked on design and painting.

"We wanted to create a lot of shade, a lot of trees, a really natural-looking green environment for the gorillas," said Morrow.

Construction took about 21 months.

"We had not had gorillas here in 35 years. The question every day was, 'Where are the gorillas?' The whole area was just so excited for us to bring gorillas back to San Antonio," Morrow said.

One of the features of the new realm is an elevated sky trail for visitors that lets them look down into the area above the glass face-to-face walls.

A strong marketing push in the late summer and fall was the beginning.

"We really teased what this

habitat would be because it is so unique," Morrow added. "It's really hard to explain unless you see it in person. As we got closer, we put out our fly-through videos and videos with staff explaining the construction process. That helped build the momentum."

Congo Falls is in the back of the zoo, which helps to disperse the crowd. It is a two-acre expansion.

Each day, the animals are challenged with enrichment exercises that make every day engaging.

"The gorillas have to go explore their area every day like they would in the wild," said Morrow. "The staff go out and change the environment each day."

"We work really hard to have a positive relationship with the gorillas because all of the training that we do is all going to be voluntary," said **Lauren Inderbitzin**, director of animal well-being. "The gorillas can choose to participate in these medical behaviors with us if

they would like to do that."

The animals are comfortable having their hands checked and poked, so when shots are actually given, it is a common feeling.

"I like to say it's called putting money in our bank," Inderbitzin told AT. "We kind of gain the trust of the gorillas and all the animals at the zoo by using their favorite treats, potentially their favorite enrichment items. Some of our animals even like tactile. Our rhinos are very tactile — any kind of scratches."

Inderbitzin enjoys seeing the reaction from guests

when they get close to them.

"Yesterday, Juba was taking a nap right by the window. We had this big group, and everyone was so quiet watching him nap," she said.

"It's Gorilla 360," said Morrow. "We have 360-degree views of gorillas; they have 360-degree views of you. I think my greatest surprise has been how much and how well the gorillas are using all the space. The guests have multiple levels to explore this habitat, and so do the animals."

It is worth noting that another addition to the San Antonio Zoo is **The Ralston**, an elegant new event center perched just above the gorilla habitat, with the 70-foot tower rising to the level of the event space's balcony. Morrow joked that the first time a gorilla climbed the tower, everyone in attendance abandoned the speaker when it climbed into view at the balcony's edge.

The event center has space for up to 500 guests, indoor and outdoor spaces, and captivating views.

The zoo is a completely self-funded, nonprofit organization.



The elevated walkways allow for visitors to see down inside the habitat. AT/TIM BALDWIN

Kemah Boardwalk replaces ride with new model from Larson/ARM

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

KEMAH, Texas — While Houston is without a full-fledged theme park, the nation's fourth-largest city does have amusement options in its suburbs. About 35 miles southeast of downtown lies **Kemah Boardwalk**. The amusement destination enters its 30th season in 2026. Situated on the gulf waterfront, visitors can enjoy restaurants from the **Landry's** portfolio, a resort hotel, boating and amusement rides.

Over time, the climate conditions can take their toll. Management at Kemah Boardwalk made the decision to replace its **Larson/ARM** drop tower.

"The previous ride had reached its usable life cycle and was due for a full refurbishment," said **Jacob Bigger**, general manager, Kemah Boardwalk. "It was cost-effective to replace it with a whole new ride, allowing us to leverage upgraded technology in the control system and get an entirely new structure that will

be enjoyed by our guests for years to come."

The ride stands 140 feet and is quite visible in the entertainment district, as well as the surrounding area.

"The tower removal and reinstallation were relatively easy swaps thanks to our third-party contractors, but we were not able to use the existing foundation to ensure structural integrity with new anchor bolts," Bigger told *Amusement Today*. "This did present a unique challenge in surveying and excavating the old foundation and repouring the new."

The Boardwalk could have simply retired the ride, but management knew the value of having the attraction return.

"Having a high-thrill drop ride is a staple of any amusement park," Bigger said. "We definitely were missing something the last couple of years without the Drop Zone. We cater to all levels of thrill seekers, and this ride provides tremendous value for high thrill in a small footprint. We considered other high-thrill towers for this space, but the Drop



The newly installed Drop Zone stands 140 feet, delivering a big thrill on a small footprint. COURTESY KEMAH BOARDWALK

Zone by ARM was the only one that would allow us to maintain the same height."

"The installation of the new Drop Zone at Kemah Boardwalk is marked by a few significant details," said **Mike Gill**, president, ARM "This tower represents a continued relationship with Kemah and the Landry's group spanning more than 16 years. The installation was a well-orchestrated success with efforts by team members from all sides.

It speaks volumes when an owner chooses to replace your product with an upgraded version. Visitors can expect a fresh new look and a modern lighting display."

"We are happy to continue working with the Kemah team to bring thrills to the Texas coast," added **Hunter Novotny**, Larson.

"This tower specifically is the first completed project with Larson since the **Rocky Mountain Construction**

acquisition," added Gill. "Our manufacturing partnership with Larson/RMC continues to be highly valued and as strong as ever, enabling each of our companies to bring its strengths to the industry."

"Overall, the ride is very similar to the previous, but there are some minor modifications on the control side that the guest likely would not notice," said Bigger. "We were able to use the (**Chance**) Aviator's existing control room to house the electrical for the ride and made slight improvements to make it easier to maintain the ride."

Kemah Boardwalk will be working with **KCL Lighting** to give the tower a true presence.

"This is a light projection system that will allow the 140-foot tower to change colors, but it can be easily maintained on the ground," Bigger said. "When installed later this spring, it will be the first KCL system on the Boardwalk."

"The unique programming capability will add to the on- and off-ride excitement," noted Novotny.



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Park Post-its



AT: Pam Sherborne
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The **Neon Museum**, the Las Vegas, Nevada, non-profit illuminating the city's cultural legacy through iconic signage and storytelling, has announced its 2026 lineup of sign relighting and artifact additions. Some of those events include honoring Siegfried and Roy's transformative impact on Las Vegas entertainment with the unveiling of the famous tiger sculpture, relighting The Mirage lagoon and Binion's Horseshoe signs. It will also showcase a Las Vegas Grand Prix piece from 2023. This year-long series will honor legendary entertainers, landmark resorts and pivotal moments in the city's evolution.

As a salute to America's everyday community heroes and to America's 250th birthday, officials at **Silver Dollar City**, Branson, Missouri, decided to offer \$59 tickets to teachers, healthcare workers, first responders, military veterans and public servants. The offers are available online with verification and are valid for select dates throughout the 2026 season. Active military will receive free 2026 Season Passports.

Silver Dollar City will celebrate America's birthday all summer long, beginning May 9 with a kickoff concert in Echo Hollow Amphitheatre. The park also will debut a special patriotic line of merchandise along with themed food and beverage offerings, including Patriotic Pop, a custom cherry berry cream soda created by **Coca-Cola**, shoofly pie, johnnycakes and much more.

Newsweek has recognized **Dollywood**, Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, as one of America's Greatest Workplaces for Women 2026, following the results of a recent survey. It is the second consecutive year Dollywood Parks and Resorts has earned the Top Workplace for Women award.

The America's Greatest Workplaces for Women 2026 award is based on a nationwide, large-scale independent research study that Newsweek

conducted between April 2025 and October 2025. Newsweek conducted nearly 180,000 employee interviews, which included more than 2.7 million comprehensive company reviews to determine the recipients of this year's awards.

Wild Adventures Theme Park in Valdosta, Georgia, kicked off its 30th anniversary season on March 14 and, in doing so, unveiled an enhanced experience across every corner of the park.

According to a news story that ran in Valdostatoday.com, the park upgraded rides, debuted new animal encounters, introduced fresh food concepts and showed off the fully completed Water's Edge.

Upgraded rides include improvements on the Island Falls, Safari Train and Boomerang. The new animal experiences feature a new habitat in Oasis Outpost for the spider monkeys. The fully completed Water's Edge features two new rides, Boat Parade and Wing Swinger, two all-new food locations and a home for the park's beloved Ferris Wheel, the Horizon Wheel, and a new first aid location and quiet room.

Time is running out for guests at **Universal Studios Hollywood**, California, and **Universal Orlando Resort**, Florida, to power up their visits with the limited-time experiences within the imaginative and interactive Super Nintendo World and at Universal CityWalk in celebration of Nintendo and Illumination's highly anticipated film, *The Super Mario Galaxy Movie*.

The limited-time experience, which launched on March 10, is continuing daily through Monday, April 13. Fans of all ages can look forward to leveling up with exclusive offerings and photo opportunities

More than 40 skilled **Walt Disney World**, Orlando, Florida, bus drivers revved up their talents in March for a friendly Disney Cast Life competition known as Bus Rodeo. Each participant tackled a 10-minute challenge course designed to test precision, safety and skill to see who would be crowned the best bus driver on the property.

Disney Transportation leaders designed a course full of challenges, from tight turns to a sudden stop at 30 miles per hour, all based on real situations Disney drivers encounter every day while keeping guests safe.

This year's champion is **Doc**, a 10-year Disney bus driver who crushed the course with an impressive time of eight minutes and 26 seconds.

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Give Kids The World 40th anniversary event honors joy and legacy

AT: Susan Storey
Special to Amusement Today

KISSIMMEE, Fla. — Stars do many things. They serve as navigational guidance. They inspire awe and wonder. They provide light in the darkness. For the past 40 years, tiny plastic stars have twinkled on the ceiling of the Castle of Miracles at Give Kids The World Village, one for each wish child who signed their name and left it for a fairy to place it in its forever home.

"The stars are a deep tradition here at Give Kids The World," said **Caroline Schumacher**, president and CEO of Give Kids The World. "Every wish child receives a small star which they personalize during their stay with us. And each night, Stellar the Star Fairy carefully places those stars in the Castle sky. When the family returns to the Castle to see where she hung their star, it becomes a core memory and moment that remains with them, long after they return home."

This year, Give Kids The World is celebrating its 40th anniversary, and in honor of the milestone, the organization decided to add a new star among the thousands that twinkle from the Castle's ceiling.

"We knew it was time to place a star in honor of our founder, **Henri Landwirth**," Schumacher said. "Give Kids The World is a place



More than 40 alumni wish families returned to Give Kids The World to take part in the Founder's Day event (above). Caroline Schumacher, president and CEO of Give Kids The World poses with Stellar the Star Fairy on Founder's Day (right).
COURTESY PB&J STUDIOS



where kindness lives. We are here because of Henri's compassion for children who are dealing with the challenges of a critical illness.

"We needed the right partner to make this idea a success," Schumacher continued. "The team at **B. Morrow Productions (BMP)** immediately understood the importance and significance of Henri's star, and they did a beautiful job bringing our creative director's art to life. We are so grateful to **Brian (Morrow)**, Monai and the entire BMP team. Henri's star is our North Star and

guiding light as we carry on his lasting legacy."

Monai Rooney, senior manager of development and culture at BMP and a former team member at Give Kids The World, partnered closely with Give Kids The World throughout the process. "As creators of experiences, we believe the most meaningful moments are the ones that live on in family memories," Rooney shared. "Henri Landwirth devoted his life to creating a place where those moments could flourish — where families could find joy, hope, and precious time together when they needed it most. Creating this star is an honor for all of us at BMP. We are proud to be part of this lasting tribute to his extraordinary legacy."

While BMP installed the intricate vine décor and delicate shield, Schumacher invited alumni wish children to complete the final step. Blending Give Kids The World's past with its present, **Katy Gore**, a wish child from 1989, **John Goode**, a wish child from 1994 and **Oliver Auman**, a wish child from 2023, all worked together to place the star.

"I was just two years old when I came to Give Kids The World," Gore said. "Henri and the Village team

members became part of my lifelong extended family. Each star in this Castle represents a wish child like me. And because of Henri, we'll never be forgotten."

Along with the placement of the star, Give Kids The World debuted an original new short feature, "What Henri Gave the World." The film tells Henri's personal story as a survivor of the Holocaust who immigrated to the United States and would later start Give Kids The World after learning about a child with cancer who passed away before the travel arrangements for her wish trip were finalized. Longtime Village partner **SNA Displays** donated a state-of-the-art monitor to ensure the film for volunteers, families and supporters on a daily basis. The story seamlessly transitions from reel to real as the final moments of the film depict an animated star rising upward, guiding the viewer's eyes to land on Henri's star.

"As a teen living through the Holocaust, my father never knew what the next day would bring," shared **Gary Landwirth**, Henri's son. "Years later, he recognized that uncertainty in the children at the Village. Wish children like Katy and Johnny were

drawn to him because they knew his background and what he had been through, and that his childhood had been stolen from him. They knew he understood that they were going through similar dark times, battling critical illness. The star is the perfect metaphor to represent his life, compassion and love for children at Give Kids The World."

Along with the unveiling of the star, Founder's Day guests — wish families, partners, volunteers and longtime friends of Give Kids The World — enjoyed unlimited ice cream, rides on the wheelchair accessible carousel, interactive games on the Avenue of Angels and more, all while sharing favorite memories of their experiences at the Village. Families posed for photos in front of the all-new hand-painted Partner Wall. A starry-themed mural depicts each of the Village's whimsical buildings along with stars that list the names of long-term corporate partners, including **Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando, SeaWorld Orlando, IAAPA, ITEC/TAIT**, and many more.

At the end of the night, all eyes turned to the sky for the Village's first-ever drone show.

"This was a special project," shared the producer, **Jayson Raitt**. "It was an honor to work together with the team at **Dronisos** and launch this gift for Give Kids The World's guests. The final scenes, which included the Village's colorful logo, left a lasting, emotional impression on all of us."

"We are grateful to our incredible partners and volunteers who help us honor and carry on Henri's legacy of kindness and compassion for children who need it most," Schumacher concluded. "Our work is not done. This year, we will welcome 7,000 families, and we will welcome another 7,000 next year. As Henri said when Give Kids The World started 40 years ago, we will be here to serve families as long as there is a need."

•gktw.org



Dronisos delighted guests with an exclusive show of 400 drones as part of Give Kids The World's Founder's Day celebration (above left). **B. Morrow Productions** fabricated the shield and star, incorporating Founder Henri Landwirth's signature. Former wish children **Katy Gore**, **Johnny Goode** and **Oliver Auman** hung the star during a special ceremony in March (above right).
COURTESY PB&J STUDIOS

DOF Robotics unveils its latest innovation, a compact flying theater

AT: Tim Baldwin

tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

ISTANBUL, Turkey — Known for dynamic virtual reality and simulator rides, **DOF Robotics** has something new to offer. While the largest theme parks have the luxury of installing flying theaters, smaller operators don't have the ability to pursue that. Until now.

DOF markets the new product as the Compact Flying Theater.

"The name is intentionally direct: 'Flying Theater' immediately communicates the category to operators and buyers familiar with immersive attractions, while 'Compact' highlights the product's key differentiator," said **Ceyda Taş**, commercial marketing specialist, DOF Robotics. "The Compact Flying Theater is designed specifically for locations and investors that want to deliver a premium flying theater experience but have limited space and budget. By rethinking the traditional flying theater format, DOF Robotics has created a solution that makes this globally proven attraction category accessible to a much wider range of venues."

The new product has undergone months of intensive ideation, engineering development and testing. In comparison to larger versions in theme parks where riders move into the screen, the Compact Flying Theater moves the domed screen over the passengers.

"We have combined the company's deep experience in motion simulation and immersive attraction systems," Taş told *Amusement Today*. "Drawing on years of expertise in the motion theater sector, the team focused on refining every aspect of the experience before bringing it to market."

Amusement Expo 2026 marked the moment when DOF Robotics was ready to introduce this concept to the global industry.

"Our new Compact Flying Theater attraction quickly became one of the highlights of the show, drawing strong interest and con-



A Compact Flying Theater was brought to the DOF booth at Amusement Expo for attendees to get firsthand experience (above). The use of a mobile screen or dome allows the dynamic movement of DOF's ride system to interact with media content without VR headgear.

AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON; COURTESY DOF

sistent traffic from attendees eager to see and ride it," said **Sam Rhodes**, president, North America. "It's clear that the Compact Flying Theater made a significant impression across the FEC industry."

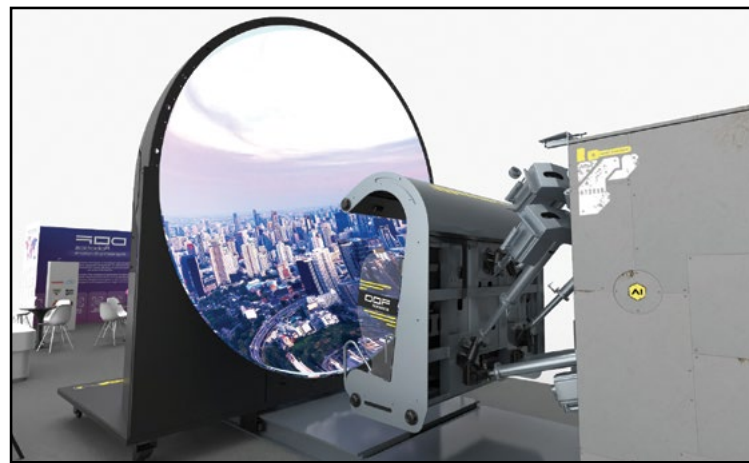
Whether an attendee of Amusement Expo or an FEC looking for its newest draw, operators are looking for what's different.

"The feedback was overwhelmingly positive," Rhodes told *AT*. "Many guests described the experience as comparable to a large-scale, destination theme park attraction — yet perfectly suited for an FEC environment. One of the most surprising and well-received aspects was the affordability, which exceeded expectations for an attraction of this caliber."

"The Compact Flying Theater is not simply a scaled-down version of a traditional flying theater. Instead, it represents a ground-up rethink of the category, designed for venues that previously could not accommodate this type of attraction," said Taş.

According to Taş, three elements set it apart:

"First, the engineering:



The system features six DOF motion synchronized with a curved or dome screen, combined with multi-sensory effects such as scent, wind and water mist. This integration delivers an immersive flying sensation that feels far larger than the system's physical size.

"Second, the footprint: The attraction supports four to 20 riders and is engineered to fit into locations where a full-scale flying theater would normally be impossible. In addition, the system can also be designed as a movable solution, giving operators greater deployment flexibility.

"Third, flexibility: Both content and configuration can be tailored to

the venue. This allows the same hardware platform to serve a wide range of markets, storytelling concepts and audience demographics," she said.

DOF sees the FEC market as a primary target.

"Flying theaters have traditionally been associated with large theme parks and destination attractions," said Taş. "The Compact Flying Theater changes that equation by making the format viable for family entertainment centers and mid-sized venues. The system's rider capacity aligns well with FEC traffic patterns, where throughput must be balanced without the infrastructure of very large theaters. Its compact footprint

allows it to be integrated into existing layouts without requiring major structural changes."

The multi-sensory effects package elevates the expectations and creates a highly immersive experience that supports premium ticket pricing and repeat visits, two key performance drivers important for FEC operators.

DOF believes the attraction can also function as a strong anchor attraction within an entertainment center, drawing visitors by delivering an overall dynamic experience.

Two storytelling themes, "Sky-High Adventures" and "Stories in the Sky," resonate strongly with family audiences and mixed-age groups.

"People seek shared immersive experiences they cannot replicate at home," Taş noted. "The Compact Flying Theater makes a proven attraction category accessible to the segment that drives the majority of location-based entertainment demand worldwide."

When asked if buyers are limited to only the media content purchased, Taş explained: "The Compact Flying Theater is built around tailored flight experiences, meaning operators are not limited to a single content package. DOF Robotics provides access to a growing flying theater content library, featuring a range of environments and storylines including landscapes, cityscapes, natural wonders and adventure-based narratives."

Because the platform is designed for flexibility, operators can select content that best matches their audience, location, theme or brand positioning. Additional custom content options can also be developed, allowing venues to create unique, location-specific experiences that differentiate them in their market.

"I genuinely believe the Compact Flying Theater has the potential to reshape the direction of the family entertainment industry, and we're excited about what's ahead," said Rhodes.

•dofrobotics.com

Merlin, Sony and Triotech partner, bringing Jumanji to life at Madame Tussauds

POOLE, U.K. — Merlin Entertainments announced four new locations across its global estate where the World of Jumanji is being crafted into an immersive ride for guests to enjoy.

Using Triotech's XD Dark Ride platform, a new interactive Jumanji-themed experience will be on offer to guests visiting Madame Tussauds locations in the United States and Australia. It represents the next iteration of the beloved film franchise being brought to life in innovative formats at Merlin attractions, following the opening of a dark ride at Gardaland Resort (Italy) in 2022 and a themed land at Chessington World of Adventures Resort (UK) in 2023.



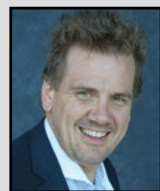
Debuting at Madame Tussauds attractions in New York, Hollywood, Las Vegas and Sydney in July 2026, the experience places riders inside a high-stakes jungle mission where they must work together to battle creatures, overcome obstacles and compete for the highest score. Built using game developer favorite tool, Unreal Engine, and designed specifically for the XD Dark Ride system, the experience combines real-time interactive gameplay, dynamic motion seats and immersive effects to deliver a fast-paced competitive ride.

"Jumanji is one of the most exciting adventure worlds in modern entertainment, and we're thrilled to bring that energy to XD Dark Ride," said Ernest Yale, founder and CEO of Triotech. "Collaborating with Sony Pictures Entertainment to introduce the platform's first major IP adaptation marks an exciting new chapter for us, and we can't wait for guests to experience the adventure firsthand."

"It's great to see our collaboration with Sony Pictures Entertainment diversify into fresh formats in four new locations across Merlin's global estate," offered Jonathan Lewis, vice-president of global IP at Merlin, "Having seen the World of Jumanji delight guests with rides and hotel rooms at our resort theme parks in Europe, the opportunity to now work with Triotech to bring it to audiences at Madame Tussauds in the United States and Australia is an exciting new chapter in this journey. This confirms Merlin's position as the partner of choice for the world's leading entertainment IPs and reinforces how Madame Tussauds is well placed to reinvigorate its offer by hosting new, interactive concepts that bring world-famous brands to life in unique and unexpected ways."

The new experience will become available to all XD Dark Ride operators worldwide at the end of summer 2026.

"We're delighted to be launching this Dark Ride experience in collaboration with Merlin Entertainments through the iconic and globally recognized brand of Madame Tussauds — particularly in city center destinations in both the United States and Australia," added Yale. "Working with Merlin, we have every confidence that these immersive rides will resonate with audiences across the globe. Bringing Jumanji to XD Dark Ride is an exciting step forward and a great example of how interactive attractions can bring beloved worlds to life."



FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTRAL

AT: John W.C. Robinson
jrobinson@amusementtoday.com

A Tag 4 A Cause night was recently held at Lazertag Extreme in Simi Valley, California, to benefit the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Laser tag players of all ages took part by making donations directly to the cause, enjoying special format laser tag games and participating in a high score trophy challenge throughout the event.

The event was organized by Laurie Jean Britton, publisher of TiviachickLovesLaserTag.com, who observed: "Events like this are a great way to raise financial donations, but also to help raise community awareness for an important cause. Laser tag players can make a real difference while enjoying the game they love."

VenueSumo, an all-in-one venue management software platform for the attractions and leisure industry, announced the appointment of Jamie Turnbow as Vice President, Americas.

Turnbow joins VenueSumo following senior operational leadership roles at Altitude Trampoline Park and Sky Zone, where she led large, multi-site portfolios across the United States. Her appointment comes as VenueSumo accelerates global expansion and deepens its partnership-first approach with venue operators.

"Jamie has lived and breathed the day-to-day realities of running large, high-volume family entertainment venues," said Alex White, director at VenueSumo. "She understands exactly what matters most to operators on the ground. That experience is invaluable as we continue to scale globally and serve our customers."

Play Playground Nashville celebrated its first birthday after logging more than 750,000 game plays in its inaugural year. The venue marked the milestone by inviting the public to join staff and VIPs in a birthday celebration on February 27.

Since opening its doors, Play Playground Nashville has quickly become a destination for friend groups, date nights, celebrations and out-of-town visitors looking to trade ordinary evenings for high-energy play. In just 12 months, guests have powered up the venue's life-size games more than 750,000 times.

"To see thousands of guests walk through our doors during our first year has been outstanding," said Phil Royle, CEO, Play Playground. "Nashville has clearly embraced the power of play, and this first birthday is our way of thanking the community and inviting everyone back to

celebrate how far we've come together."

All assets from The Tailgate Garage Entertainment Center in Canton, Michigan, were sold through a public online auction conducted by Orbitbid.com, Inc., which closed officially at 6 p.m. on March 24, 2026.

The liquidation was conducted per order of a secured creditor, offering a complete dispersal of a fully operational, family-focused entertainment facility. All bidding took place online.

The Tailgate Garage was known for providing a one-of-a-kind entertainment experience featuring attractions for all ages, including arcade games, interactive sports and group event activities.

In celebration of International Women's Day and Women's History Month, Embed — through its website and social media channels — presented Rise & Renewal: Women's Stories of Strength, a tribute to the extraordinary women.

"At Embed, we believe in the value and power of cultural and gender diversity in our talent pool; we're proud to be the change that other companies, both large and small, aspire to achieve. We believe that when women rise, industries transform and strengthen," said Renee Welsh, CEO of Embed. "Rise & Renewal is about celebrating the women who have shaped our journey, challenged the status quo, and continue to build the future of the business of fun with courage, creativity and conviction."

Rise & Renewal honors women who transform challenges into opportunities, paving the way for future generations by spotlighting inspiring stories from women across its global team and the industry — sharing their journeys, lessons, hacks and leadership to inspire the next generation of innovators.

A new Star Lanes is coming to Columbus, Ohio, near the Ohio State campus, per a report from Columbus Business First. The address has not been confirmed as brothers Doug and Jeff Mechling are still finalizing picking a site. The team is looking to open the new location sometime in mid-to-late 2027.

Star Lanes opened its first 35,000-square-foot boutique bowling venue next to Columbus's Polar Fashion Place. The space offers bowling, arcade games, billiards, darts and a 4D theater ride.

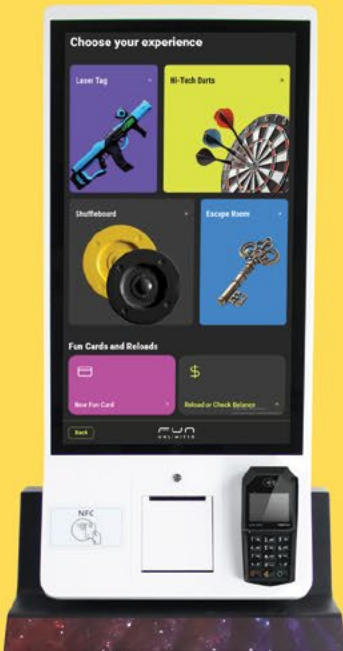
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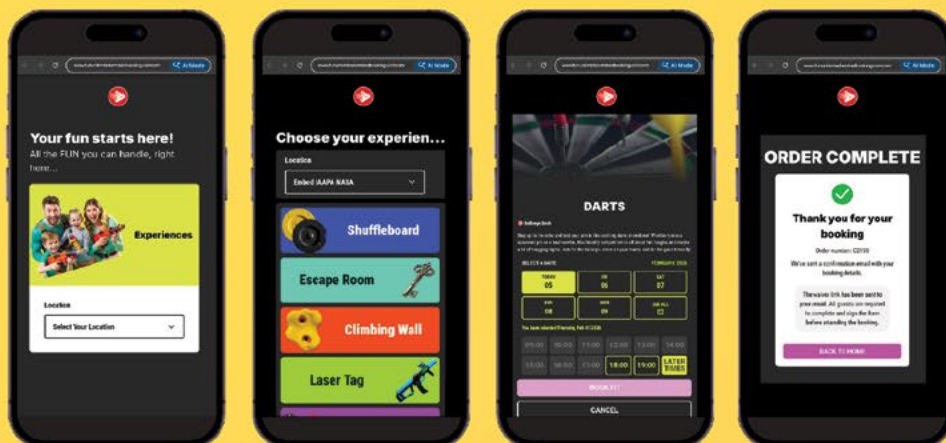
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- **GENERAL ADMISSION + PLAY PRIVILEGE** – You can now assign General Admission tickets to Embed media (game card, Mobile Wallet, and wearables) with Play Privilege. Guests can easily add this to their game cards or wearables upon purchase at a KIOSK+, tap the media on the attraction’s reader, and enjoy!

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SCHEDULE A MEETING



Monstrous growth for Monster Mini Golf brand and its experiences

AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — **Monster Mini Golf**, an entertainment center franchise offering kooky, spooky fun to communities and neighborhoods throughout the U.S., experienced the biggest growth year it has ever had in 2025. Brand owners feel their passion for the product, the attention given to detail and the effort that has been made to market and grow efficiently have led to this growth.

Monster Mini Golf was founded 22 years ago by **Christina** and **Patrick Vitagliano**. Three years ago, the founders sold the brand to a group of its top-performing franchisees. That franchise-led ownership structure is guiding the



Chris King

brand's growth today.

Chris King, now CEO of Monster Mini Golf and a franchisee, said that after the purchase, he and his partners consciously set out to "beef up" the brand.

"We took two years to beef up our infrastructure," King said. "Then last year, we opened nine new stores



Monster Mini Golf, headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, experienced huge growth in 2025, with nine new stores opening and another 16 franchise agreements made all across the U.S. COURTESY MONSTER MINI GOLF

and secured an additional 16 new franchise agreements."

King has been with Monster Mini Golf for

almost 12 years, coming in as COO with the original owners. Over the years, he opened up four Monster Mini Golfs franchises in the Charlotte, North Carolina, area. Charlotte also is the brand headquarters. His partners are **Holly Hernandez**, chief legal officer; **Nick Masrandrea**, chief development officer, and **Alex Gonzalez**, a silent partner.

"We now have a total of 63 franchises," King said.

In the first years of ownership, the partnership hired a franchise sales organization, **Rep'M Group**, to enhance the exposure of the brand, and they have been attending franchise broker events and other networking events.

"We also do all of our own props, theming and integration," King said. "And we do all the marketing for our new stores in house."

King said they have found that a Monster Mini Golf store can work just about anywhere "as long as the economics work. You will find our stores located mostly in urban areas, out in the communities."

"We are a family entertainment center," he

said. "We are not a bar. We don't serve alcohol. We want everyone in the family to have a good time."

Monster Mini Golf utilizes glow-in-the-dark props in its mini golf courses. As guests wind their ways through the 18-hole courses, they are able to get a taste of local flavor with hand-painted artwork depicting sites and symbols unique to the area. Some of the "monsters" encountered are animated; they move, talk, wiggle, squawk and some even tell silly jokes.

Along with the miniature golf, guests can enjoy state-of-the-art arcades, bowling, laser tag and private events with "Haunted Mansion" event rooms.

"This past year, we've proven that families are still dying for high-energy, immersive entertainment," King said. "Our innovative and affordable entertainment model engages guests of all ages while delivering a fun lifestyle and returns for our franchisees. Our growth is a testament to our operators who share our passion for creating undeniable, memorable moments with family and friends."

•monsterminigolf.com

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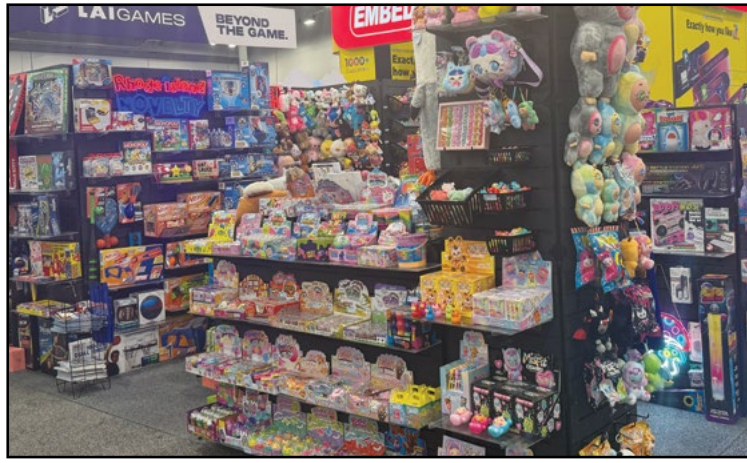
2026 Amusement Expo International is a winner in Las Vegas

AT: John W.C. Robinson
jrobinson@amusementtoday.com

LAS VEGAS — Las Vegas continues to be the city of winners and opportunity. Buoyed by a move of this year's Amusement Expo International (AEI) to the new, state-of-the-art West Hall of the Las Vegas Convention Center and a new headquarters hotel — Resorts World — the 2026 event was once again an overwhelming success. Held March 16 to 19, 2026, its energy and excitement levels spilled over to the exhibit hall, education program and everything in between. The event is sponsored by Amusement & Music Operators Association (AMOA) and The American Amusement Machine Association (AAMA).

"Amusement Expo is one of the best opportunities each year for us to connect with the people who power this industry," offered Sara Paz, CMO of perennial Amusement Expo exhibitor Embed. "It's always energizing to spend time with our customers, meet new operators and have meaningful conversations about the challenges and opportunities they're seeing in their venues."

The 2026 Amusement Expo's show floor featured almost 250 exhibiting



The 2026 AEI exhibit showfloor was filled with items for FECs, LBEs, arcades and more. This included an impressive display of gifts and redemption items from Rhode Island Novelty (above left). Battle Kart was eager to showcase its interactive go karting system which uses projection mapping to add extra levels of fun to indoor go karting, with no need for a helmet or VR goggles (above right). AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON



companies — an increase in nearly 9% from the 2025 event — showcased in more than 760 booths along the floor.

"We attracted 71 new exhibitors with 133 additional booths this year," stated Brian Glasgow of WTGlasgow, who manages the expo. "To date, expo registration included 2,018 buyers and 2,491 non-buyers and exhibitors in 2026."

For the 15th year, the Amusement Expo was co-located with National Bulk Vending Association (NBVA). The association had a pavilion within the AEI show floor dedicated to its members with 14 exhibitors and 42 booths. In addition, 2026 was the fourth year co-locating with the Billard

Congress of America (BCA). Its pavilion on the show floor had approximately 56 companies and 223 booths.

In a growing trend, the AEI show floor featured a couple of rideable attractions. DOF debuted its new Compact Flying Theater which proved extremely popular on the show floor [see story page 24]. In addition, in its second year of exhibiting at the AEI, Altitude Attractions brought its new people-powered Rock On Swing for attendees to see and try out.

"It's been a good turnout for us this year. Having the ride definitely helps in a busy show like this. We've had a lot of interest in the Rock On Swing, and hopefully [we'll] get a few plays here pretty quick and get success stories going," commented Jayden Wallentin of Altitude Attractions. "They've loved [the ride]. Everyone that's ridden has been laughing and screaming and always

get off with a smile!"

The show floor, as always, featured extensive exhibits and demonstrations of various virtual reality (VR) concepts. Verse Immersive set itself apart from other exhibitors with its unique augmented reality (AR) offerings.

"We are the only glasses-based, augmented reality concept in the world. We currently, partner with FECs, LBEs, movie theaters and science centers, as well, bringing a new, brilliant experience to guests," stated Jack Meyer with Verse Immersive. "The difference between AR and VR is with augmented reality, you can still see the room around you. You can still see one another and interact with a layer of 3D holograms over the world."

AEI also featured Foundations Entertainment University's Las Vegas education program. Kicking off its 24th year, the program featured 110 participants.

As the industry's longest running educational program, Foundations remains true to its original vision of arming new entertainment developers and existing facility operators with the tools needed to navigate today's challenging business environment.

In addition, education continues to be a key pillar of AEI, with sessions designed to give operators practical insights into improving performance, guest experience and revenue opportunities. AEI's 2026 Education Committee once again developed an exceptional lineup this year with 310 registrants including AEI sessions and luncheon.

As part of the education program, Shae Pepler Cornette of ESPN served as the keynote luncheon presenter. The program highlighted the significance of family and relationships in entertainment. Cornette closed her program by highlighting the Final Four program, with tips on choosing winning teams.

Highlighted educational sessions included:

- Turning Your Lowest Revenue into Your Highest — In this session, Embed's Sara Paz discussed how FECs are transforming traditionally low-revenue days into significant profit generators.

- Payments 101 — In this session, Jeremy Dickamore, of Embed, delved into the essentials of payment processing.

► See VEGAS, page 26

2026 AAMA Award Winners

Manufacturer of the Year:

Bandai Namco Amusement America

Distributor of the Year:

Scott Shaffer, CEO of Shaffer Distributing

Supplier of the Year:

Rhode Island Novelty

Allied Member of the Year:

George and Howard McAuliffe — Pinnacle Entertainment

FEC Location of the Year:

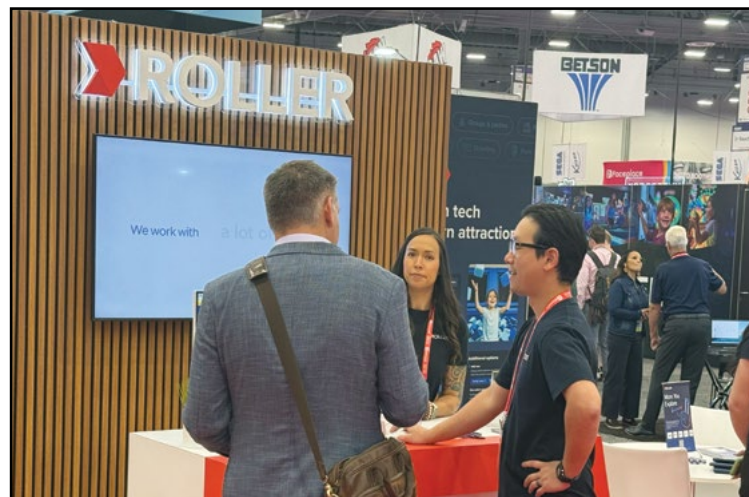
Star Lanes in Columbus, Ohio

Lifetime Achievement Award:

Eugene Jarvis

AAMA Hall of Fame inductees:

Al Bettelman, David Cohen, Larry DeMar, Kane Fernandez, Linda Fernandez, Terry Moss, Frank Pelligrini, Elliott Portnoy, Allen Weisberg and Sam Westgate



Roller's exhibit booth had representatives speaking with current and potential clients regarding its software offerings which remains popular with FECs. AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON

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VEGAS

Continued from page 25

This year's AEI added two ticketed events. On the evening of March 16, nearly 150 attended the Level Up networking event held at Resorts World's Rose Outdoor Terrace.

"In addition, we hosted Women's Industry Rise & Shine Breakfast on Tuesday morning [March 17] with 130 in attendance," added Glasgow. "Our panel of speakers at this event included **Beth Standlee, Lori Schnieder, Sara Paz, Kelly Foster, Julie Kratochvil and Sandy Mattson.**"

"Amusement Expo 2026 brought a fresh feel to the show this year!" exclaimed **Roller's Alyse Sklover.** "New hall, changes to the show floor layout, and the addition of the Rise & Shine: Celebrating Women of the Industry Breakfast. "One thing that was extremely powerful and maybe the best



Verse Immersive's interactive AR glasses — demonstrated here by Jack Meyer — exhibited promise to deliver new levels of fun to FECs, LBEs and more. AT/JOHN W.C. ROBINSON

yet, were the conversations had on the floor."

Betson Enterprises sponsored a mobile app for the event. With it, attendees navigated AEI information quickly and efficiently. It is available on iOS and Android.

"Usage of our Premium Mobile App continues to grow," said Glasgow. "It offers a Smart Planner feature that includes exhibitor list, event map, session list, speaker list, product gallery and much more. We had 635 active users, more than 10,000 e-booth

profile views and over 11,000 education session views."

AEI's 2027 event will be held at the Las Vegas Convention Center's North Hall. Education will be on March 15 and 16, 2027. The trade show will be held on Wednesday, March 17 and Thursday, March 18, 2027. The headquarters hotel for Amusement Expo International will again be at the Resorts World Hotel & Casino with a block of rooms also available at the Westgate.

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WATER PARKS

World's Largest Swimming Lesson marks 17 years of saving lives

Global safety and skill-building event returns on June 25

OVERLAND PARK, Kan. — Launched in June 2010, **The World's Largest Swimming Lesson (WLSL)** is a global water safety event uniting water parks, aquatic facilities and community organizations across six continents. Its singular purpose: teaching life-saving water competency skills to help prevent drowning and building awareness about the vital importance of teaching children to swim.

The 17th Annual WLSL event takes place on Thursday, June 25, 2026, over the course of 24 hours. Coordinated by the **World Waterpark Association (WWA)**, the event happens just one week before the July 4th holiday — the deadliest stretch of summer for drowning incidents. Statistics from the **Centers for Disease Control and**

Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control WISQARS, show that nearly 17% of all U.S. drownings occur during July, with risk peaking in the days surrounding the holiday.

"Every child deserves the safety that basic swimming skills and layers of protection provide," said **Rick Root**, president of WWA. "What started as a bold idea 17 years ago has become a shared mission that spans the globe. When facilities from dozens of countries come together on the same day for the same cause, it sends a powerful message to families everywhere that learning to swim saves lives."

The human toll of drowning is staggering. The **American Academy of Pediatrics** reports drowning as the leading cause of death for children ages one through four, and the second leading cause of unintentional injury death for children ages five through 14.



Research shows that participation in formal swimming lessons can significantly reduce the risk of drowning among young children, yet millions of kids worldwide still do not receive formal swimming or water safety training. The WLSL addresses that gap directly, providing kids and parents with exposure to life-saving skills and reinforcing layers of protection to keep families safer in and around the water.

For participating facilities, the WLSL is more than a community service event — it's an

opportunity to showcase their team's commitment to the people they serve. Staff members frequently cite the event as a season highlight, bringing energy and pride to their work as they see firsthand the impact of what they do every day. Facilities gain visibility, strengthen ties with local families and nonprofit organizations, and demonstrate their role as a cornerstone of water safety in their communities. Many venues use the event to welcome first-time visitors and introduce new audiences to their programs.

All types of aquatic facilities and learn-to-swim providers are welcome and encouraged to register. Local WLSL events take place at water parks, pools, aquatic centers and beaches. Facilities can create a special WLSL event or participate by tracking and promoting their regularly scheduled swim lessons that day. Registered facilities receive a comprehensive, turnkey Host Location Guide and a full suite of digital marketing materials, including logos, posters, flyers, web banners, press releases, social media graphics, day-of-event materials and curriculum.

Last year's event drew participation from facilities across the globe. Since its inception, the WLSL's message has generated more than \$37 million in earned media in the U.S. alone.

Registration starts at \$99 per facility, with discounts available for operators hosting the event at multiple locations.

•wsl.org

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June 25, 2026

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Schlitterbahn unveils new mat racer slide from WhiteWater West

AT: Jeffrey Seifert
jseifert@amusementtoday.com

NEW BRAUNFELS, Texas — Schlitterbahn Waterparks & Resorts is shifting into high gear for its 2026 season. On March 4, park officials officially pulled back the curtain on Wasserbahn Racers, a high-speed, three-lane mat racing attraction designed to bring a new level of competition to the world-famous waterpark.

Developed by industry leader WhiteWater, Wasserbahn Racers is more than just a water-slide — it's a head-to-head battle. Riders will plunge face-first down a 278-foot course integrated into the park's iconic natural hillside with a series of dips before the signature splash-down near the banks of the Comal River.

Thanks to integrated real-time stopwatch clocks. Racers will be able to see their exact times the moment they hit the splashdown zone, settling the score for "bragging rights" instantly.

The three-lane mat racing slide replaces the Der Bahn Speed Slides attraction, a racing body slide that riders slid down feet first. Der Bahn was one of the early attractions at the park and operated for more than 40 years. Wasserbahn

Racers covers roughly the same footprint. Riders will slide face-first on a mat along a 278.6-foot-long run while dropping a total of 37.6 feet and achieving speeds up to 24 mph.

The announcement, held at the construction site, featured a fleet of exotic racecars, including Ferraris and Vipers, to mirror the ride's high-velocity theme. Schatze, the park's mascot, made a special appearance in race-ready gear. Park Manager Justin Loehr emphasized that 2026 is about more than just one new ride; it's a property-wide refresh.

"Wasserbahn Racers will be a highlight of a big year," said Loehr. "The park is excited to introduce an all-new attraction while continuing to enhance classic favorites across the property."

"We wanted to create something that was new and innovative and thrilling and really at the core of Schlitterbahn's DNA," said Jeffrey Siebert, Six Flags regional general manager - Texas.

"The cool thing is, not only is it a traditional waterslide that has lots of fun hills and dips and great speed, but when it's over, you can turn around, and we're actually timing you so you could truly see



The three-lane racing slide uses the natural topography of the land to its advantage. COURTESY SCHLITTERBAHN WATERPARKS & RESORTS

who won, which is awesome fun," Siebert said.

Beyond the new racer, guests can expect upgrades across several areas of the park, including enhancements to the resorts, the Blastenhoff Tower, Han's Hideout, the Submarine and Octopus slides, the Pirate Ship at Surfenburg and additional improvements across Schlitterbahn's themed areas.

"Schlitterbahn is woven into the fabric of New Braunfels, and everything we do is built for the families that come here to make memories year after year," Loehr said. "It's all part of our commitment to elevating the guest experi-

ence while honoring what makes this place special."

"To this day, with all the improvements that are going on, it's not only that we need to live the legacy, but make sure that the park is more spectacular, more exciting, more thrilling than ever before," Siebert said.

Schlitterbahn New Braunfels officially kicks off its 2026 season on May 2. While the general public will have access shortly after, 2026 season pass holders will receive exclusive "first-to-ride" privileges for Wasserbahn Racers.

Located on the banks of the spring-fed Comal River in New Braunfels, Texas, Schlitterbahn has more than 40 attractions in a unique natural setting across 70-plus acres. Schlitterbahn started to take root in 1966 when Bob & Billye Henry took over the Camp Landa campground on the banks of the Comal. At that time, the camp centered around activities on the river: a rope swing, paddleboats and canoes. In 1967, the Henrys added an 80-foot fiberglass flume that was a straight shot down to the river.

In 1977, at the age of 22, the youngest son, Jeff Henry, took a trip to

Orlando and visited two newly opened water parks: Wet'n'Wild and Walt Disney World's River Country. Upon his return, he convinced the family to build a standalone water park to bring more attention to the resort. In 1979, Schlitterbahn Waterpark was born.

The family took great pride in developing new and innovative rides and technologies while keeping the focus on family-friendly amenities and values. Schlitterbahn created several industry-firsts, such as the Boogie Bahn surf ride, Master Blaster uphill waterslide, tidal wave rivers, Transportainment-based and convertible water parks, and also continued to offer world-class guest amenities, including free parking, free use of tubes and the option to bring in picnic meals for free into all of its parks.

Schlitterbahn New Braunfels has been recognized as the World's Best Waterpark, winning *Amusement Today's* prestigious Golden Ticket Award for the first 26 years since the award was started in 1998. Schlitterbahn has been featured in several Hollywood movies, dozens of national TV programs and countless publications around the world.



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Norwegian Cruise Line debuts its second Aqua Slidecoaster

MIAMI, Fla. — The newest ship in the **Norwegian Cruise Line** (NCL) family made its debut at a christening ceremony on March 27, 2026, at its home port of Miami. This follows its maiden transatlantic crossing from the port of Civitavecchia with a stop in Barcelona. The Norwegian Luna is the fourth ship in the cruise line's Prima class and the second in the Prima Plus class. Like its sister ship, Norwegian Aqua, which debuted last year, Luna includes a launched water coaster from **Wiegand.Waterrides**. Unlike other uphill coasters, which utilize water jets or linear induction motors to propel rafts uphill, the Wiegand ride uses an arm to push the rafts uphill. The concept was first presented six years ago, with a model of the slide displayed at IAAPA Expo 2019.

The Slide Coaster eliminates the need for towering staircases by using a ground-level launch system. Two-person rafts (limited to 300 pounds per rider or 400 pounds combined) are positioned via conveyor belts onto dual side-by-side tracks. A central "sled trolley" on a roller coaster track uses arms to engage the back of the rafts, using linear synchronous motor technology to propel them uphill at speeds up to 50 km/h (31 mph).

Once at the peak, the rafts are released into 600-foot-long enclosed tubes. These tubes feature vibrant lighting effects and clear sections for panoramic views as riders navigate high-speed twists and turns. After a final splashdown, the rafts float through a return channel back to the original boarding area, remaining in the same channel for the entire circuit.

Although the Prima Plus class of ships does not have a dedicated water park, a variety of pools and splash pads are found throughout the ship. The main pool on deck 17 has a large open-air pool surrounded by numerous loungers. Adjacent to the pool is the Waves Pool Bar, where guests can grab a refreshing beverage before settling into a lounge chair. One deck up is the kids' aquapark with multiple cascading water features. Vibe Beach Club at the stern on deck 17 is an exclusive, adults-only retreat with four hot tubs, including two oversized infinity hot tubs perched at the edge of the deck. The club offers ocean views, plush loungers and perks like chilled towels and fruit skewers. Access requires a pass or the rental of a cabana for two.

For a more serene experience, Infinity Beach is home to two stunning infinity pools, located on either side of deck eight, along the ocean boulevard walkway. Each "beach" boasts a glass-walled Infinity Pool perched right at the edge of the ship, plush daybeds, multiple lounge chairs and panoramic views off the side of the ship as far as the eye can see.

—Jeffrey Seifert



NEWS SPLASH

AT: Jeffrey L. Seifert
jseifert@amusementtoday.com

After more than 30 years as a staple of the **Hellie's Tepee Pools** hot spring experience, the "big blue slide" has officially been retired. The fiberglass structure, a local landmark since 1991, was completely disassembled in January following a two-year hiatus from operation.

While the slide became synonymous with summer fun in Thermopolis, Wyoming, its history stretches back much further. Owner **William Moriarty** noted that the slide was originally acquired from a water park in Billings, Montana, where it had already seen at least two decades of use.

"It's spent 50 years in the sun and done a yeoman's job in that time," Moriarty said.

The decision to remove the slide comes after five decades of battling Wyoming's unforgiving climate. Despite only operating seasonally between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the structure remained exposed to intense summer UV rays and harsh winter winds year-round.

This constant exposure eventually took its toll on the fiberglass, making the slide's continued operation a safety and maintenance challenge.

"We looked at getting it refurbished and rehabilitated, but it started to become more and more apparent that we'd be better off replacing rather than restoring it," said Moriarty.

Splash Landings Indoor Aquatic Complex in Glenview, Illinois, closed in January for renovation. The aquatic center plans to remain shuttered until at least September while \$8.4 million in improvements are made to the facility.

The aquatic facility, run by the Glenview Park District, is part of a larger, multipurpose Park Center that includes a gymnasium, health and fitness facility, indoor track, senior center, meeting rooms and educational programs. The aquatic center and the Park Center that houses it opened in 2001.

"No major updates or changes have been made to the facility since its opening," said **Anna Ables**, spokeswoman for the Glenview Park District.

"The Glenview Park District is replacing and modernizing Splash Landings to meet today's operational standards and community expectations," said **Steve Neill**, division director of recreation and museum services at the Glenview Park District. "Over the past 25 years, pool technology has advanced significantly, and this project will incorporate more environmentally-friendly, resource-conscious mechanical equipment. Guest expectations for indoor swimming

and aquatic play have also evolved."

Key upgrades include a multi-level interactive play structure, an expanded waterslide and a warmer zero-depth pool. Technical improvements — such as independent temperature controls for the lap and activity pools and modern filtration systems — will ensure a more comfortable and cost-effective experience.

While the facility gets a fresh look and accessible family changing rooms, favorites like the six-lane lap pool, whirlpool and therapy pool will remain.

This project is funded by a \$2.8 million state grant and \$5.6 million in park district savings.

Le Canton Resort in Teresópolis in the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, has officially broken ground on **Acqua Park**, a new 1,000-square-meter indoor aquatic center. Scheduled to open in late 2026, the facility will accommodate up to 370 guests and features dedicated adult and children's pools, a sauna and a bar.

Located near **Hotel Magique**, the project is part of a broader resort upgrade that includes transforming the current soccer field into two recreational pitches. CEO **Mônica Paixão** noted that this investment ensures the resort remains a top-tier, year-round destination regardless of the weather.

"We want Le Canton to continue being a complete experience at any time of year. The indoor aquatic complex expands the possibilities for relaxation and entertainment and adds value to the stay," said Paixão.

Hersheypark, Hershey, Pa., has announced significant enhancements to its **Boardwalk at Hersheypark** water park area for the 2026 summer season. The expansion introduces two new play zones to the Bayside Pier children's area — The Inlet and The Island — which together add 45 new aquatic features. The Island will debut towering 10-foot-tall palm trees that tip buckets of refreshing water.

To improve the visitor experience, the park is installing rubberized safety decking and expansive shaded canopies in the two new play zones. The redesigned layout is intended to streamline guest flow and provide faster access to the park's water attractions.

These water park enhancements are available to all guests as the 11-acre water park is included with admission to Hersheypark. The water park is open Memorial Day through Labor Day.

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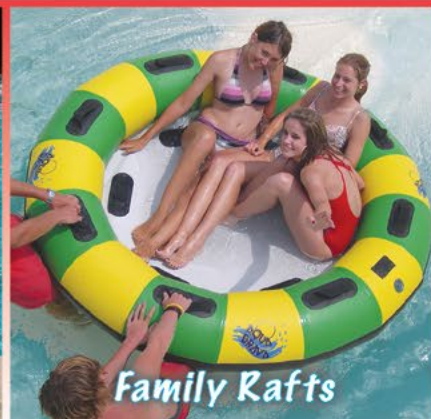
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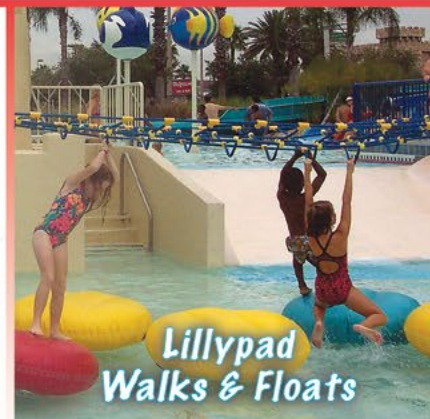
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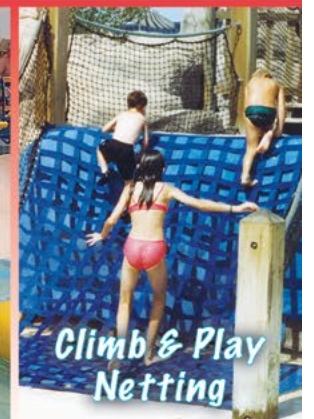
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Enchanted Parks acquires multiple properties from Six Flags

AT: Tim Baldwin
tbaldwin@amusementtoday.com

ORLANDO — Rumors have circulated, and now the reports have been confirmed. Six Flags, which merged with Cedar Fair in 2024, has sold off several parks to a new group to be operated as Enchanted Parks. In recent earnings calls, Six Flags has stated that it will focus on the top-tier parks that bring in the majority of profit. Still looking at reducing debt, complicated by the COVID-ravaged 2020 season, Six Flags felt it was in its best interest to sell multiple properties, and Enchanted Parks will continue to operate each of these facilities.

“Enchanted Parks is a spinoff from Innovative Attraction Management (IAM) to include our owner/operator park division. It is part of the strategic vision we started back in 2019 as we tried to move the company beyond consulting and management,” said James Harhi, CEO, IAM. “We really accelerated this path in 2024 when we formed a strategic partnership with EPR Properties and acquired our first property, Water Safari Resort. We are excited to welcome Franceen Gonzales to our team as the COO. She will be leading the transformation of these assets.”

In addition to Water Safari Resort, Diggerland USA is under the same



The Great Escape (above) is one of six locations that will form Enchanted Parks. As demonstrated by the acquisition of Schlitterbahn Galveston Island, water parks are included in the transition (below). AT/JEFFREY SEIFERT, TIM BALDWIN



umbrella.

EPR Properties is a real estate investment trust, which Harhi terms as the “man behind the man.”

“They are a large player in the industry,” he said. “Six Flags is one of the companies that uses them with properties like Darien Lake, Frontier City, Splashtown, etc. They own the majority of AMC Theaters and places like Andretti’s, Regal and Top Golf. [EPR Properties] is a huge player in the entertainment field. Their pri-



mary goal is to go out, buy real estate and then do operating leases with them. We will do a 40-year operating lease with these properties.”

The properties being released by Six Flags are

Six Flags St. Louis, Worlds of Fun and Oceans of Fun, The Great Escape and Six Flags Great Escape Lodge, Valleyfair, Michigan’s Adventure and Schlitterbahn Galveston.

“If you look at their last

2025 quarterly call, they referenced that 80% of the EBITDA comes from the top 12 parks, like Cedar Point, Knott’s Berry Farm, Kings Island and Carowinds,”

▶ See ENCHANTED, page 34

“It doesn’t feel like a vendor, it feels like a partnership.”

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Valleyfair (below), the park that helped form the company name Cedar Fair, has now been sold to EPR Properties. Worlds of Fun and Oceans of Fun will help make up the Enchanted Parks group (above left). Six Flags St. Louis (above right) will most likely be the trickiest park when it comes to names in the chain. AT/TIM BALDWIN

► ENCHANTED

Continued from page 33

Harhi said. “These are the parks that do more than 2 million in attendance a year.”

Harhi told *Amusement Today*: “We feel there will always be a place for regional parks in the market. Enchanted Parks can come in and be much nimbler and more efficient, while building relationships with the local community.”

“We know how much these parks mean to our guests and to the incredible teams who bring them to life every day,” said Six Flags CEO **John Reilly**, in a statement. “Decisions like this are never taken lightly. We’re confident the parks will be in good hands with EPR and its partners, who have strong experience operating parks of this quality and scale. At the same time, this move allows Six Flags to concentrate on the parks that we believe offer the greatest opportunities for growth and long-term success. Our goal is to continue creating amazing experiences for all our guests, and this agreement helps us stay focused on that commitment.”

“We visited all six parks in December. They are in much better shape than if you read the headlines in the newspaper,” said Harhi. “There is definitely some investment to be made to get consistent ride times up. That’s going to be a big push of ours as



we’ve looked at the guest reviews. We want to stabilize the rides and make sure we have rides that operate. We’re going to be opening these parks in less than 60 days of acquiring them.”

Elevating the parks to the company’s quality standards will be the immediate tasks at hand, with new attractions added in the third year.

Enchanted Parks, for the most part, won’t be tampering with the names of the parks.

“Valleyfair, Michigan’s Adventure, Worlds of Fun ... those are names that have been in the community for more than 50 years. We’re not going to change those names,” Harhi said. “We’re not going to walk away from that.”

Notably, Six Flags St. Louis may be a complicated moniker, and the new owner is looking into

that facility’s history with the potential name Mid-America by Enchanted Parks.

“Consistent with our strategy, this divestiture enables us to concentrate our capital, leadership and operational focus on the properties that we believe generate the strongest returns and offer the greatest long-term upside,” said Reilly. “Since joining the company, I have been clear that Six Flags’ earnings power has been under-realized. This transaction will simplify our portfolio, strengthen our balance sheet and position us to execute with greater clarity and discipline.”

Of note, a seventh property, **La Ronde**, was sold to **La Ronde Operations, Inc.**, which is owned by former Six Flags exec **Kieran Burke**.

When asked what

Amusement Today chats with Enchanted Parks’ James Harhi

AT: Go back to the beginning with conversations with Six Flags. How did discussions come about?

Harhi: This deal has been talked about for a little while. EPR was the true deal maker as they had existing relationships with Six Flags and IAM to broker a win-win-win for all three parties.



James Harhi

Many of the Six Flags properties have specific IPs, such as Looney Tunes and DC. Are there approaches in the works to address this?

We are still finalizing the license agreements, but our goal is to maintain those assets as we operate.

What would you like the local audiences to know about what they can expect with the change? They may be afraid their park may be going away.

EPR and EP are committed long-term to these assets. We operate clean, safe and fun properties. We will be empowering the local leaders to improve the parks and make them the first choice for local entertainment. These parks have a better long-term vision under our leadership, where Six may have sold the real estate.

Last fall, Six Flags advertised its MVP passes would be good at 40+ parks. And for those local audiences, they have purchased those. Now what? How will Six Flags and Enchanted Park deal with the season pass issue?

Enchanted Parks will honor all MVP passes for the 2026 season. Six Flags will honor any home park MVP buyer at their parks as well.

excites Harhi the most, he told *AT*: “The challenge gets my blood pumping. This is a transformative deal for our company. When I was lifeguarding at Disney in the 1990s, I never would have thought this is the path my life would take. I am just so blessed that my

employees, friends, family and business partners believe in me to give me this opportunity. Like I said, we have a 40-year lease. We’re committed to these parks long term. We’re not going to walk away from that legacy. We’re really excited about what we’ve built.”

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NEAAPA holds successful education conference, annual meeting

AT: Ed Hodgdon
Special to Amusement Today

PORTSMOUTH, N.H. — The Northeast's Entertainment Association (NEAAPA) held its 113th Anniversary Education Conference & Annual Meeting, held in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, over a three day period from March 2-4, 2026. Taking place at the Sheraton Portsmouth Harborside Hotel, attendees participated in many educational sessions, networking opportunities and celebrations for the winners of the NEAAPA Awards and hall of fame inductees.

Let's get techie

This year, NEAAPA rolled out a new networking opportunity for the Education Conference with the Northeast Attractions Tech Connect. This session brought together attendees with point-of-sales companies from across the industry, bringing users of software in the same room to discuss how they have implemented the systems and the company representatives to have open dialogue and learn from each other. Gateway Ticketing Systems and Intercard were on hand, also meeting with potential new customers.

Lots of learning

NEAAPA's Education Committee scheduled great speakers to cover a range of



NEAAPA President Erik Beard of International Ride Training welcomed attendees to the annual meeting dinner (above left). Bob Nowak of Rhode Island novelty and Joel Golder of Palace Playland were inducted into the NEAAPA Hall of Fame (above right). COURTESY NEAAPA/LAITH ABUOQAB

topics that members requested to hear more about. Kicking off the education sessions on Monday, Nelda Cronin, Esq. of Travelers, spoke about cyber security and risk mitigation, talking about ways to reduce risk and what to do if you are a cyberattack target.

Tuesday started off with attendees getting out the experimental phase with AI, learning from Kevin McNulty of NetWeaveSocial. He was requested back by attendees after his session last year on getting started with AI. The Roundtables were back as well, allowing attendees to talk with colleagues about Operations, Marketing, Training and more.

"These have become an integral part of the Education Conference," said Chris Nicoli, brand manager at Canobie Lake



Park and chair of the planning committee.

The afternoon education sessions brought Kevin Joly from the Employer's Association of the Northeast to discuss HR compliance and education members on its partnership with NEAAPA with the HR Hotline for questions and advice, a free service to all NEAAPA members. To cap off the education sessions was Taryn Bolduc and Cheryl Salazar from High Road Management Training to bring new techniques and tips for training Gen Z employees, and to tout the NEAAPA Academy Online Training, a free program that includes videos on basic guest service functions available to watch and learn from any device. High Road is writing the content that will be produced by the association. This year, the number of classes is set to double by the end of the year.

Time to set sail

NEAAPA events always have great networking opportunities throughout its schedule. That started with the President's Dinner on Monday night with Board President Erik Beard welcoming attendees to the event. During Tuesday's buffet lunch, NEAAPA held its March board meeting, conducting regular business with committee reports

and updates on initiatives. Ed Hodgdon of Hodgdon Consulting was re-elected as board secretary and executive director.

Festivities really got underway when Captain Gus Brinewater began greeting attendees on their way to the Vendor Showcase and Annual Meeting Reception. The room was decorated according to the dinner theme of "Nautical Northeast," thanks to the generous support of RWS Global. This carried into the Annual Meeting Dinner where guests saw photos of the award winners and hall of fame inductees styled as sea captains.

During the Annual Meeting Dinner, the business meeting was conducted where Board President Erik Beard announced this year's President's Award recipient as Joe Montalto. Reports on the association's finances and membership were given, and members celebrating a milestone were honored. The Nominating Committee presented its proposed slate of officers and directors. All officers and directors up for re-election remained on the board, with two new directors added: Michael Nelson, Operations Director of Lake Compounce and Amy Cannon representing RWS Global.

Winners of the NEAAPA Awards were:

- Alan E. Ramsay Safety Award: Cory Cormier of Funtown Splashtown U.S.A.

- Paragon Award for Marketing Excellence: Splish Splash Water Park.

- Meritorious Service Award: Steven Gioe

This year's Hall of Fame inductees, Joel Golder of Palace Playland and Bob Nowak of Rhode Island Novelty, were formally inducted into the NEAAPA Hall of Fame with video tributes produced by the Marketing and Entertainment team at Canobie Lake Park.

Gold Sponsors of the Education Conference and Annual Meeting were Dippin' Dots, Naughton Insurance, Palace Playland, Rhode Island Novelty, RWS Global and Stag Hollow Mining. Annual Meeting Dinner Sponsors were Canobie Lake Park, International Ride Training, and Santa's Village. Annual Meeting Reception Sponsors where Amusement Today, Chance Rides, Great Coasters International and Premier Rides. Education Conference Sponsors were Amusement Entertainment Risk Insurance Associates, Haas & Wilkerson Insurance, Merchant Cost Consulting and Philadelphia Toboggan Coasters, Inc. Education Conference Afternoon Break Sponsors were Certified Travel Media and Venu+. Education Conference Morning Break Sponsors were Holland Fiberglass/Ralph S. Alberts Co., Inc. and MV Rides. The Meeting Badge Sponsor was North American Amusement. Non-alcoholic beverages were provided by Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast.

The 114th Anniversary Education Conference and Annual Meeting is scheduled for March 1-3, 2027, with the location to be determined.

● neaapa.com



Sara Seay of Premier Rides spoke with attendees at the NEAAPA Vendor Showcase and Annual Meeting Reception prior to the event's dinner. COURTESY NEAAPA/LAITH ABUOQAB

PAPA spring meeting held at Hershey Lodge, Convention Center

AT: B. Derek Shaw
bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

HERSHEY, Pa. — Nearly 100 members and guests of the Pennsylvania Amusement Parks & Attractions Association (PAPA) gathered February 23 and 24 for their annual spring meeting at Hershey Lodge and Convention Center. Attendees were comprised of member parks, attractions, suppliers, manufacturers and individual members. PAPA strives to foster an environment where industry peers can gather and learn from one another.

Day one included a board of directors meeting in the afternoon, followed by a reception and banquet that evening. Both the board meeting and evening proceedings were led by PAPA President Rick Knoebel, a fourth-generation owner of Knoebels Amusement Resort.

The popular 50/50 raffle for the Barbara J. Knoebel Scholarship Fund took place during the evening. As a result, over \$500 was raised.



Attendees to the spring PAPA meeting were comprised of member parks, attractions, suppliers, manufacturers and individual members from across the state. This included (l to r) Hersheypark's Jeremy Underkoffler and Brad Kirkbam, and Mike Birardi of Illuminated Integration. (above right). AT/B. DEREK SHAW



The winner, Bill Wydra, with Ashland Technologies, donated his portion back to the scholarship fund. Each year, ten \$1,000 scholarships are awarded to students who work at any of the participating member parks or attractions. Upon the conclusion of dinner, many attendees retired to the lodge lobby bar to continue networking and imbibing.

Day two started with the annual breakfast membership meeting. Association business included reports in various aspects of the industry: legislative updates, Amusement Ride Safety

Advisory Board, a recap of the fall Parks and Carnivals Education (PACE) ride safety seminar, water park issues, PAPA website, marketing and human resource areas.

First-time attendee, Dan Majernik with USI Insurance Services, was pleased with his experience. "It was wonderful to reconnect with familiar faces and make some new connections. Being surrounded by individuals dedicated to creating fun for families every day is truly special. Tonight's [banquet] served as a reminder that behind every roller coaster,

waterslide, and funnel cake stand are passionate teams focused on safety, service and experience. Leadership, collaboration and innovation are at the heart of this industry, wrapped in cotton candy and nostalgia. Here's to strong partnerships, new ideas, and another season of smiles across the Commonwealth."

"It has been fantastic," said Knoebel. "It was a little difficult because of the weather. All things considered, a lot of people were still able to make it. Everyone brought something to the table. Everything went

very smoothly."

Describing the organization's purpose, he added, "The PAPA is more than a group of amusement parks; we are a professional trade organization representing parks, attractions, manufacturers and service providers across the amusement industry. Our mission is to foster a unified spirit among our members, share critical information, including updates on safety regulations and industry standards, and support one another whenever we can. We invest in the future

► See PAPA, page 38

Herschend Family Entertainment completes Silverwood acquisition

ATLANTA, Ga. and ATHOL, Idaho — Herschend Family Entertainment Corporation has completed its acquisition of Silverwood Theme Park and Boulder Beach Water Park from Silverwood, Inc. This follows the signing of an exclusive terms sheet announced in November 2025.

Silverwood has been operated by the Norton family since 1988. Today, the 400-acre property features more than 70 rides, attractions, and shows — including Boulder Beach Water Park — and draws hundreds of thousands of guests annually from across the Pacific Northwest.

"Herschend was the only choice for us," said Paul Norton, Silverwood executive director. "As a family business, they understand what it means to build something by hand, with your whole heart — and the deep responsibility that comes with serving families and communities. I trust them to carry our legacy forward with the same care and commitment my family has."

Herschend's 22,000 hosts



Herschend Family Entertainment completed its acquisition of Idaho's Silverwood Theme Park. The family destination — known for its flowers and landscaping — includes more than 70 rides and Boulder Beach Water Park. AT/TIM BALDWIN

serve nearly 20 million people annually across its more than 40 North American family entertainment brands. Herschend approaches each experience it operates with a long-term mindset and a commitment to preserving the distinct identity of every property.

"Silverwood is the result of decades of heart, vision and hands-on dedication," said Andrew Wexler, CEO of Herschend. "The team has built more than a theme park —

they've built a place that brings people together, creates joy and strengthens the community around it. Being entrusted with that legacy is an incredible honor, and we take that responsibility seriously. Our role is to shepherd what's been built and support the team so Silverwood can continue creating memories — and thriving — for generations to come."

"As a family-held company, we're not driven by quarterly earnings or short-term trends; we have the responsibility and privilege

of thinking generationally," said Chris Herschend, Herschend's board chairman. "That long-term view guides how we invest in our people, our brands and the communities we serve — which now includes the incredible Silverwood team and the guests who have cherished this property for nearly four decades."

This season will be all about listening, learning and building relationships. Important details regarding the acquisition:

- Silverwood will remain Silverwood. The 2026 season, which begins May 2, will offer the same beloved experiences guests know and expect, including Night of the Stars, Coaster Classic and Scarywood.

- Silverwood will continue to operate with its existing identity and team. Herschend is committed to open, transparent communication with hosts, guests and the local community as the transition moves forward. Herschend is focused on supporting hosts and empowering them to deliver exceptional guest experiences.

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Fire leveled a maintenance building owned by Michigan's T.J. Schmidt & Company. COURTESY T.J. SCHMIDT & COMPANY

Fire destroys T.J. Schmidt & Company maintenance building; carnival to open

AT: Ron Gustafson
Special to Amusement Today

STANDISH, Mich. — Fire destroyed one of the maintenance facilities of T.J. Schmidt & Company on Thursday, March 12. No injuries were reported.

The Schmidt and Burtch families, operators of the carnival company, posted an online statement which, in part, said: "We would like to sincerely thank all of you who reached out following the fire at one of our winter maintenance facilities. Your support, encouragement and offers of assistance have meant a great deal to our entire organization.

We want to reassure our valued business partners across the fair and festival industry, as well as the thousands of guests who join us each summer, that we have a comprehensive plan in place for the 2026 season and beyond. Our partners and guests can continue to expect the same company-wide, superior standards: exceptional customer care, a safe and family-friendly environment and exciting high-quality midway experience that defines our organization as 'Michigan's Family Fun Midway.'"

T.J. Schmidt & Company opens its 2026 season April 24 to 26 at the Maple Syrup Festival, Vermontville, Michigan.

►PAPA Continued from page 37

of our industry by providing scholarships to team members within our parks and by sponsoring education and training programs focused on ride safety. And while our work is serious and important, we never forget that we're in the business of fun, so along the way we make sure we take some time out to enjoy what we do."

Knoebel is the 53rd president of PAPA, with Tom Rebbie, Philadelphia Toboggan Coasters, Inc., 1st vice president and Ricky Spicuzza, general manager of Kennywood as 2nd vice president. Jeannie Reedy of Knoebels Amusement Resort serves as secretary/treasurer of the organization.

This was the 91st edition of the spring meeting of the PAPA. The organization was formed in 1935 with R.L. Plarr from Dorney Park serving as the first president. In 1946, famed roller coaster



Rick Knoebel, president of the PAPA, made the announcements at the start of the dinner meeting. He is entering his second year of his two-year term. COURTESY SAM SHURGOTT/IRM

designer Herbert P. Schmeck from Philadelphia Toboggan Company was president. The annual spring meeting is traditionally held in Hershey. The 2026 summer fun meeting will be held at Knoebels Amusement Resort, Elysburg, Pennsylvania, July 20 and 21, during their 100th anniversary season. The next PACE ride safety seminar takes place October 27 to 30 at Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.



A bank of redemption games was an eye-catching display during the annual two-day NJAA Variety Show. COURTESY SAM SHURGOTT/IRM

Atlantic City's Golden Nugget welcomes 31st NJAA Variety Show

AT: B. Derek Shaw
bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. — The New Jersey Attractions Association (NJAA) once again held its East Coast Gift & Variety Show at the Golden Nugget Resort and Casino, Atlantic City, February 26 and 27.

Billed as "The trade show to keep you connected to the amusement industry in the tri-state area," there were 25 participating vendors that brought their newest games, prizes and food for attendees to see, purchase and implement in their establishments. On the first day of the expo, the NJAA hosted its 35th annual scholarship kick-off cocktail party on the trade show floor.

More than 500 attendees from various segments of the tourism and amusement industry included owners, partners, managers and buyers, as well as workers of amusement parks, arcades, games, concessions, piers and restaurants.

"Over 20 years of putting on this incredible trade show — amazing attendance and such an upbeat crowd! Thank you to everyone who made it special," said Kim Samarelli, NJAA executive director.

The show began in the mid-1970s at the Aztec Hotel in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Vendors operated out of their rooms, with attendees traveling room to room. Other recent locations have included the Trump Marina Hotel Casino and Taj Mahal, both in Atlantic City. This was the 17th time at the Golden Nugget.

Concurrent with the trade show, 75 people attended the National Association of Amusement Ride Safety Officials seminar online. This was for level I and level II inspection certifications.

The NJAA is a proactive organization, identifying concerns while working for the safety, health and overall economic betterment of the amusement industry.



The team from Morey's Piers — (l to r) Chuck Magnuson, Anthony Sinnerard, Jr. (front), Anthony Sinnerard and William Rutherford — attended the NJAA show. COURTESY SAM SHURGOTT/IRM



Rhode Island Novelty participated at the event with the company's Bob Bauer on hand representing. COURTESY SAM SHURGOTT/IRM



The event showcased 25 participating vendors, including Classic Toy who had their popular children's items on display. COURTESY NJAA

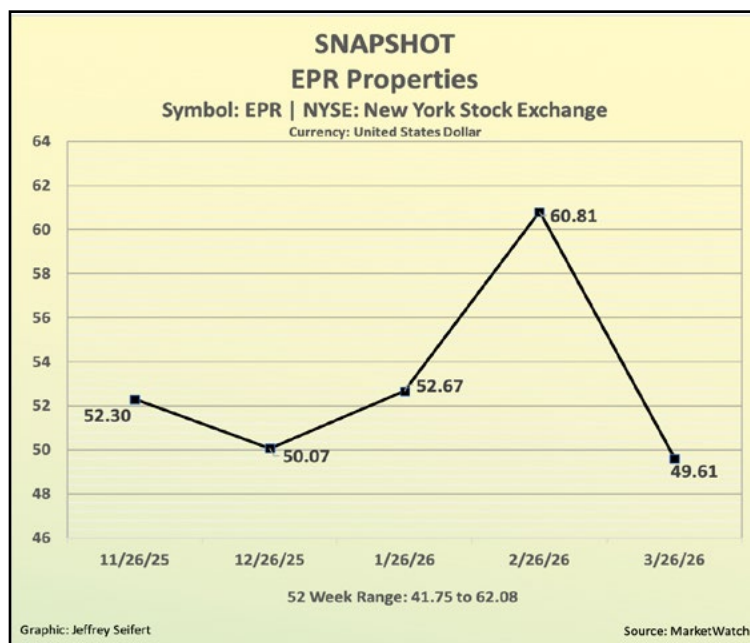
MARKET WATCH

COMPANY	SYMBOL	MARKET	PRICE 3/26/26	HIGH 52-Week	LOW 52-Week
PARKS AND ATTRACTIONS					
The Blackstone Group	BX	NYSE	109.63	190.09	101.73
Carnival Corp.	CCL	NYSE	25.28	34.03	15.07
Comcast Corp./ NBCUniversal Media	CMCSA	NASDAQ	28.72	35.11	24.12
Dave & Busters Entertainment, LLC	PLAY	NASDAQ	10.65	35.53	10.1
EPR Properties	EPR	NYSE	49.61	62.08	41.75
Fuji Kyoko Co., Ltd.	JP:9010	TYO	2,493	2,704	1,908
Haichang Holdings Ltd.	HK:2255	SEHK	0.475	1.060	0.425
Leofoo Development Co.	TW:2705	TSEC	16.60	19.30	14.80
Lucky Strike Entertainment Corp	LUCK	NYSE	8.00	11.61	5.71
MGM Resorts International	MGM	NYSE	37.57	40.16	25.30
Parks America, Inc.	PRKA	OTCQX	36.50	69.99	30.01
Royal Caribbean Cruises, Ltd.	RCL	NYSE	274.00	366.50	164.01
Six Flags Entertainment Co.	FUN	NYSE	17.68	38.47	12.51
Tivoli A/S	DK:TIV	CSE	616.00	666.00	584.00
United Parks & Resorts Inc.	PRKS	NYSE	31.00	56.95	28.77
The Walt Disney Company	DIS	NYSE	94.75	124.69	80.10
Warner Bros Discovery Inc.	WBD	NASDAQ	27.07	30.00	7.52
SUPPLIERS/OTHERS					
Brogent Technologies, Inc.	TW:5263	TSEC	94.00	130.00	81.77
Callaway Golf Co.	CALY	NYSE	13.37	16.65	5.42
Falcon's Beyond	FBYD	NASDAQ	8.72	29.02	3.71
Sansei Technologies, Inc.	TYO:6357	TYO	2,285	2,739	1,031

Daily industry stock information available at amusementtoday.com!

Worldwide Markets — CSE/DK: Copenhagen Stock Exchange; JP: The Tokyo Stock Exchange; NASDAQ: National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations; NYSE: New York Stock Exchange; OCT: Over-the-counter stocks; SEHK: The Stock Exchange of Hong Kong; TSEC/TAIEX: The Taiwan Capitalization Weighted Stock Index; TYO: The Tokyo Stock Exchange; TW: The Taiwan Stock Exchange.

—SOURCES: Bigcharts.com



DIESEL PRICES

Region (U.S)	As of 3/23/26	Change from 1 year ago
East Coast	\$5.480	\$0.375
Midwest	\$5.160	\$0.190
Gulf Coast	\$5.134	\$0.299
Mountain	\$5.174	\$0.378
West Coast	\$5.826	\$0.466
California	\$6.870	\$0.442

CURRENCY

On 3/27/26 \$1 USD =	
0.8659	EURO
0.7491	GBP (British Pound)
159.55	JPY (Japanese Yen)
0.7930	CHF (Swiss Franc)
1.4447	AUD (Australian Dollar)
1.3835	CAD (Canadian Dollar)

BUSINESS WATCH

United Parks & Resorts reports financials

ORLANDO — **United Parks & Resorts Inc.** reported its financial results for the fourth quarter and fiscal year 2025.

For 2025, attendance was 21.2 million guests, a decrease of approximately 378,000 guests or 1.8% from fiscal 2024. The year's total revenue was \$1.7 billion, a decrease of \$62.7 million or 3.6% from fiscal 2024. Net income for 2025 was \$168.4 million, a decrease of \$59.1 million or 26.0% from fiscal 2024.

"Our fiscal 2025 results did not meet our expectations," said **Marc Swanson**, chief executive officer of United Parks & Resorts Inc. "While the consumer environment was uneven and our results were impacted by negative international tourism trends and volatile weather during certain peak visitation periods, we should have delivered better results, particularly on the cost side of the income statement. We have moved decisively to address our less than optimal cost management and have updated and focused our plans and investments for 2026 designed to drive attendance and guest spending across our parks."

"In 2025 and through February 24, 2026, we repurchased 6.7 million shares, representing approximately 12% of our shares outstanding, underscoring our strong cash flow generation, long-standing commitment to returning excess cash to our shareholders, and deep conviction in the exceptional value of our shares."

Disney reports 2026 first quarter earnings

BURBANK, Calif. — **The Walt Disney Company** reported earnings for its first quarter ended December 27, 2025.

The experiences unit reported more than \$10 billion in quarterly revenue for the first time. Disney's domestic theme parks recorded \$6.91 billion in revenue, while its international parks reported \$1.75 billion in revenue, each up 7% compared with the prior-year period. In particular, Disney saw attendance rise at its domestic theme parks, while "international visitation was softer," stated **Hugh Johnston**, chief financial officer.

Net income for the quarter was \$2.48 billion, or \$1.34 per share, down from \$2.64 billion, or \$1.40 per share, in the same period a year earlier. Adjusting for one-time items, including tax charges related to a deal with **Fubo**, Disney reported \$1.63 in earnings per share.

"We are pleased with the start to our fiscal year, and our achievements reflect the tremendous progress we've made," said **Robert A. Iger**, chief executive officer. "As we continue to manage our company for the future, I am incredibly proud of all that we've accomplished over the past three years."

Gold Medal introduces ReadyServe Jr.

CINCINNATI, Ohio — **Gold Medal Products Co.** has announced the launch of ReadyServe Jr., a compact self-serve popcorn dispenser designed to help operators minimize labor while maximizing convenience and efficiency. Part of Gold Medal's Ready Series of popcorn vending machines, ReadyServe Jr. is built to meet the needs of sports bars, convenience stores, entertainment venues and other high-traffic locations where space constraints and labor efficiency are critical.

ReadyServe Jr. features a heated cabinet with a built-in crisping system that holds up to 20 gallons of popped popcorn. Popcorn is easily loaded through a top-access dome and kept warm and fresh until served. With a push-button operation, customers can serve themselves quickly and easily, creating a smooth grab-and-go experience.

The unit pairs seamlessly with Gold Medal's bulk ready-to-eat popcorn, giving operators the flexibility to offer popular flavors. Its compact footprint allows venues to add popcorn service to locations that may not have space for traditional merchandisers or larger equipment.

MARKETING GETS IT DONE

Brand alignment: from pre-visit promise to on-site experience

In the attractions industry, the guest experience no longer begins at the front gate. It begins the moment a potential visitor encounters your brand online. For marketers, this means the brand promise delivered in digital channels must align seamlessly with what guests experience once they arrive on-site.

Today's guests move fluidly between channels. They may discover an attraction through social media, compare options on a website, purchase tickets on mobile, and arrive expecting an experience that reflects what they saw and felt during the buying journey. If the tone, messaging or expectations shift dramatically between those touchpoints and the physical experience, it creates friction that can diminish the overall perception of the brand.

Alignment starts with clarity about the experience you're promising. Is your attraction positioned around thrill, discovery, nostalgia, family bonding or seasonal celebration? The imagery, language and storytelling used in marketing should prepare guests for the emotional tone of their visit. When those signals are reinforced through signage, staff interactions, entertainment and operations, the brand feels authentic and intentional.

Operational teams play a critical role in this alignment. Marketers often focus on the creative side of brand storytelling, but the guest ultimately experiences the brand through employees, queues, cleanliness and ease of navigation through the park. Collaboration between marketing, guest services and operations ensures the brand promise is not only communicated but delivered consistently.

Technology has also become a powerful bridge between pre-visit engagement and the on-site experience. Personalized ticketing options, digital planning tools and mobile communications allow attractions to carry the guest relationship from purchase to arrival. These tools help reinforce brand messaging while reducing friction, whether through personalized offers, clear arrival instructions or curated experiences tailored to different guest types.

Seasonal events provide a strong example of how alignment can elevate the guest journey. When marketing campaigns for Halloween, holiday celebrations or summer festivals accurately reflect the atmosphere guests encounter on-site — décor, entertainment, food and merchandise — the experience feels immersive and memorable. When the marketing oversells or misrepresents the experience, however, it can create disappointment.

For marketers, the opportunity lies in viewing the entire guest journey as a single narrative rather than a series of disconnected touchpoints. Every interaction — from the first digital impression to the moment a guest exits the park — reinforces or weakens the brand.

In a competitive attractions landscape, the parks and destinations that stand out are those that deliver consistency. When the promise made before the visit matches the experience guests have on-site, trust grows, satisfaction increases and guests are far more likely to return ... as well as recommend the experience to others.

— Eric Fluet, *Get It Done Marketing*



Fluet

ON THE MOVE

Sally Dark Rides has announced the retirement of long-time Vice President of Technical Services **John Stegall**, whose steady leadership helped shape more than two decades of innovation at the dark rides and animatronics company. Stegall officially retired at the end of 2025 after 22 years with Sally and a distinguished career of service both to his country and to the themed entertainment industry.



Stegall

Stegall joined Sally in 2002 as technical services manager, earning the title of vice president in 2015. Over the course of his tenure, he played a pivotal role in the design, specification and execution of more than 50 dark rides around the world, beginning with Challenge of Tutankhamon at **Walibi Belgium** (2003) and ending with **Kings Island's** Phantom Theater: Opening Nightmare (2025).

"Stegall's impact on Sally Dark Rides and the attractions industry as a whole cannot be overstated," said **John Wood**, president and chairman. "His technical knowledge, integrity and commitment to excellence have left a lasting legacy in every project he touched and in every team member he mentored."

As the company honors Stegall's retirement, the company welcomed **Shawn Wiggins** to the team as technical designer, ushering in the next chapter of technical innovation.

Wiggins brings more than six years of experience in mechanical engineering, design, prototype development and project management. His expertise spans low-voltage power systems, automation controls, sensors, inputs/outputs and programming.

"Shawn's engineering background, systems mindset, and hands-on experience make him a strong addition to our technical team," said Stegall. "I'm confident he will help carry forward Sally's commitment to technical excellence and immersive guest experiences."



Wiggins

Longtime manager of Australia's **Luna Park Sydney**, **Brad Loxley** has been appointed chief operations officer for global attractions operator **Parques Reunidos**.

Reporting directly to Parques Reunidos Chief Executive **Pascal Ferracci**, Loxley will lead the entertainment giant's global operations strategy, overseeing performance, guest experience, safety and operational excellence across the group's international portfolio of theme parks, water parks, animal parks and entertainment destinations.

Since joining Parques Reunidos in 2024, Loxley has held key leadership roles in operations across Europe and Australia, most recently serving as group operations director with responsibility for the performance of more than 30 attractions.



Loxley

Falcon's Beyond Global, Inc. announced the promotion of **Saham Ali** to the newly created role of chief technology officer (CTO). In this position, Ali will implement technology strategies and innovation across the company to create unique experiences in themed entertainment and interactive attractions.

Ali, formerly executive vice president of technology, has been instrumental in shaping Falcon's technology vision and operational excellence. As CTO, he will continue to lead initiatives that will have the potential to advance the company's product offerings in areas such as real-time rendering, robotics, ride systems, extended reality (XR), generative AI, AI-driven personalization and connected experiences.

"Technology is the heartbeat of immersive storytelling," said **Cecil D. Magpuri**, CEO of Falcon's Beyond. "I have worked closely with Saham for over a decade, and he has been a driving force behind our product offerings in XR and real-time graphics pipelines. As well, he has continued to be a leader in the industry by successfully leveraging the latest technological platforms to power next-generation attractions."

Morgan's Wonderland announced **Catherine "Cat" Lorenzo** as park president. Lorenzo's appointment marks a new chapter in the park's continued commitment to inclusion, excellence and unforgettable experiences for guests of all abilities.

"As park president, Cat embodies the values that define Morgan's Wonderland," said **Dr. Brent Fields**, CEO of Morgan's. "Her dedication to operational excellence and her passion for creating extraordinary guest experiences position her to lead the park into an exciting future."

With more than 30 years of experience in the attractions industry, Lorenzo began her career at **SeaWorld San Antonio**, where she held leadership positions across park operations, culinary and merchandise.

After an extensive search encompassing more than 140 applicants, the **Chowchilla Madera County Fair** Board of Directors has announced **Natalie Worstein** as its new chief executive officer.

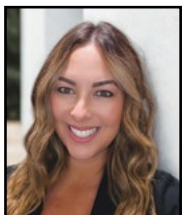
Worstein has decades of experience spanning various sectors including business administration, marketing and human resource management. Her background includes roles at several prominent organizations including **Harris Ranch Resort** in Coalinga, **Manco Abbot** in Fresno, and **Taylor Investment LLC** in Honolulu. In California, she also served as the commercial leasing manager for both **Sierra Vista Mall** in Clovis and **Sunrise Mall** in Citrus Heights.



Ali



Lorenzo



Worstein

OBITUARIES

NEAAPA Hall of Famer Laura Berni of Canobie Lake passes on

ATKINSON, N.H. — Laura T. Berni, 93, of Atkinson, New Hampshire, passed away unexpectedly on February 8, 2026. She was the beloved wife of Anthony A. (Nino) Berni, Sr., who passed away in 2004. They enjoyed 48 years together. She will be deeply missed and forever loved by her family.

Laura Berni was born in England to Angiolina and Attilio Berni on September 26, 1932, and was raised in Weston-super-Mare, England. Following WWII, she often visited Bardi, Italy, where her parents were originally from.

On October 22, 1955, she married Nino in Bardi. Laura and Nino moved to Fort Lee, New Jersey, where they started their family and began their careers in the amusement industry at

Palisades Park. In 1958, they purchased Canobie Lake Park, along with the Captell and Ulaky families, and moved to Salem, New Hampshire. Laura took great pride

in her career in the accounting department at Canobie Lake Park until she retired at the age of 83. She was inducted into the New England Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions Hall of Fame in 2004. She was a member of the Ladies of Merrimack, helping to raise funds for Merrimack College.

Berni was a devoted mother and loving wife. She enjoyed being a "snowbird," wintering in Juno Beach, Florida, with Nino, where they spent time with



Berni

family and friends. Laura also enjoyed traveling, had a love of life and relished new adventures.

She is survived by her daughter, Marisa T. of Salem, New Hampshire, and sons Carl L. and his wife, Anne, of Salem, New Hampshire, and Anthony A. Jr., and his wife, Madeline, of Windham, New Hampshire; her five grandchildren, Carl and Justine both of Salem, New Hampshire, Mia Decker (and husband, Corbin), Anthony A. III (and wife, Shawna), and Nina all of Windham, New Hampshire; four great-grandchildren, Cael and Micah Decker, and Evelyn and Anthony A. IV. Laura is also survived by her two brothers, Mario Berni and Romano Berni, who reside in Germany, and several nieces and nephews.

Roger Tofte, founder of Enchanted Forest, passes away at 96

SALEM, Ore. — Roger Tofte, the creator of Enchanted Forest, passed away peacefully on February 13, 2026, at the age of 96, with family by his side. He leaves behind his loving children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren and extended family.

Tofte took great care to pass his knowledge, craftsmanship and vision on to his children and grandchildren, long before his passing, ensuring a thoughtful transition of Enchanted Forest into the hands of the next generations. Today, three generations of the Tofte family continue to work at Enchanted Forest, carrying forward Roger's original dream and preserving

the spirit of the park for generations to come.

Tofte was born on January 8, 1930, in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and moved to Astoria, Oregon, when he was five. In 1954, he married Mavis Bjorke. Together they became parents to four children.

In 1964, Roger began construction on Enchanted Forest, building much of it by hand. At 2 p.m. on Sunday, August 8, 1971, the gates opened for the very first time. Seventy-five visitors walked through the first day and the following Sunday, 1,000 people came.

"He built this from nothing and



Tofte

everybody thought he was absolutely crazy," commented Tofte's daughter and the park's current co-manager Susan Vaslev to *The Oregonian*. "We feel really blessed working in the park — because we'll be surrounded by him every day."

For 54 years, Enchanted Forest has remained open to the public, bringing joy and wonder to generations of families and becoming a treasured Oregon tradition. Going forward, Tofte's daughters say the park will double down on its vintage charm, eschewing digital flash in favor of creating more hands-on and creative activities for children. The business will remain in the family, even without its patriarch.

Gateway 26 founder, Martin "Marty" Shapiro passed away

NORTH WILDWOOD, N.J. — Martin "Marty" Shapiro passed away peacefully on January 4, 2026. Dr. Martin Shapiro was a chiropractor who, when he graduated, was voted most likely to succeed. However, he practiced very little due to his tremendous passion for the amusement industry. Shapiro touched the lives of thousands of people during his years in the amusement business.

In 1952, at the age of 16, Shapiro received his start in the amusement business as an attendant at a Skee-ball parlor in Olympic Park located in Irvington, New Jersey. By the age of 17, he was managing the location. Just after he turned 21, he became an owner of a Fascination parlor which marked the beginning of a lifelong passion that he had with the Fascination game. After Olympic Park closed, he arrived in Wildwood in 1968 and opened a Fascination location with Walter and Cindy Florimont. He was

such a successful operator that within three years his five competitors closed their operations. In 1979, he opened Gateway 26 with the Weiner family as partners. He had 32 separate operations in Wildwood during the 1980s. Shapiro sold all of his operations except Gateway 26 by 1991, and the combination of himself, the Weiner family and Brian Sharpe grew Gateway 26 into a successful arcade.

Shapiro sold his share of Gateway 26 to Sharpe in 2007 but continued to run the microphone and greet the customers through 2025.

He was active with the Jewish community and the Synagogue in Wildwood. He was a three-time president of the New Jersey Amusement Association. He was president of several condo and timeshare boards as



Shapiro

late as 2025. Over the years, hundreds of employees, now grown, have visited Shapiro at Gateway to thank him for the impact that he made in their lives. Dozens of very successful former employees credited him with mentoring them, giving him credit for their achievements.

He had a passion for his customers. Many thousands of customers could not wait to run and see Shapiro during their Wildwood vacations. He will be greatly missed by his current and former employees, his colleagues in the amusement industry, and by the thousands of customers who enjoyed their vacations with him over his 73 years in the amusement industry.

Shapiro very quietly gave generously to dozens of charities of which St. Jude was his favorite. On June 25, 2026, which would have been Shapiro's 90th birthday, there will be a celebration of life at Gateway 26.

BREAKING NEWS

IAAPA Expo Middle East postponed

ABU DHABI, U.A.E. — IAAPA has announced that IAAPA Expo Middle East will not move forward as planned.

IAAPA has been closely monitoring the evolving situation in the Middle East as recent events continue to unfold. The safety and well-being of IAAPA members, exhibitors, attendees, partners and colleagues remains the association's highest priority.

After consideration, the IAAPA board of directors confirmed that IAAPA Expo Middle East will not move forward as planned. The decision followed extensive discussions with key stakeholders, including the IAAPA EMEA Regional Advisory Board, the IAAPA EMEA Manufacturers and Suppliers Committee, the feedback of the **MENALAC** Board of Directors, exhibitors, speakers and local members.

"This was not an easy decision," said **Jakob Wahl**, president and CEO of IAAPA. "We recognize the time, investment and commitment of our members and partners dedicated to what would have been the inaugural IAAPA Expo Middle East. We are grateful for their support and understanding as we prioritize the safety and best interests of our global community."

IAAPA will be in direct communication with exhibitors, sponsors, speakers and registered attendees regarding next steps.

IAAPA remains committed to supporting the attractions industry across the region. Next year's IAAPA Expo Middle East is scheduled to take place April 12 to 15, 2027.

Legacy SHARING

For more than 30 years, **Jeffrey Siebert** has helped build a culture of care in the amusement industry. He has served in various marketing and communications positions, as well as executive positions across the industry. Today, as the regional general manager — Texas for **Six Flags Entertainment Corporation**, he continues to foster a caretaking environment and help prepare the next generation of leaders in our industry.

Embracing the role of caretaker is shaping the legacy of Siebert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas — There is a certain poetry in how Jeffrey Siebert's career began. As an intern at the design firm Jack Rouse Associates in the early 1990s, he filed the blueprints for a new theme park under construction in San Antonio, Texas. That park is now known as Six Flags Fiesta Texas and is one of several parks under Siebert's management in his current role as the regional general manager — Texas for Six Flags Entertainment Corporation.

The path between those two moments spans more than three decades and features a string of stops that reads like a tour of American amusement history. After earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Cincinnati, where, ironically some of his professors were involved in the opening of Kings Island, Siebert worked as the marketing manager at Americana, a family-owned park in Monroe, Ohio. Following his time there, he spent time with the Cincinnati Mighty Ducks before being recruited by Paramount's Kings Island. There he worked across landmark projects at the park.

Recruited by Schlitterbahn Water Parks, Siebert found his footing in Texas, the state that would define the later arc of his career. He helped grow brands such as South Padre Island and Galveston. When Six Flags emerged from bankruptcy and began rebuilding its management team, a network of former Paramount colleagues pointed them to Siebert. He joined Six Flags Fiesta Texas as marketing director, was promoted to park president, and eventually ascended to regional general manager of Texas following the company's merger with Cedar Fair.

At the center of his professional philosophy is a discipline forged by

his years on the marketing side of the industry: the belief that data, not personal preference, should drive every major decision.

"My job is to deliver and execute for our guests," he explained. "If it were Jeffrey and Jack Land, everything would be 500 feet in the air and 700 miles an hour, but that's really not what our guests want," laughed Siebert. "Our guests want multigenerational attractions that they can go on with their family and friends." He says, "When you do that, guests are happy, your team is happy and you start getting more and more guests coming to your park. Those increased numbers begin telling their own story."

Siebert's team returns regularly to three questions: Where are we now? Where should we be? But "more importantly," he said, "where could we be?" In practice, he said, they try to cut straight to the third question and build backward from the answer.

Data may shape strategy, but Siebert is equally emphatic that running parks is, at its core, a human endeavor. "We are a business that is by people, for people, and about people," he said. "We cannot forget that." That conviction shows up in how he manages the parks he oversees. He walks ride docks and kitchen lines daily, eats park food each day, and monitors team messaging channels in real time, a setup he compared to a NASA command center. He scans social media throughout the day, looking for positive guest comments to send to each park, recognizing their hard work and effort to help guests have a great experience.

"There's an old adage," Siebert said, "that if you want to see how your team is performing throughout a day, look in a mirror. The park truly reflects and looks like the management team running it, and

Jeffrey Siebert Six Flags Entertainment Corporation San Antonio, Texas



if something looks wrong, the first place to look for answers is within that management team. It's up to us to look around and ask is this how we want it to be seen?"

Speaking about some of the most important insights he has gathered across his career, Siebert did not hesitate: hire lovable stars. "Lovable stars," he explained, "are people that we love working with, but are also very highly skilled; they've got the book smarts, and they've got great emotional intelligence. Especially when you get in leadership roles, it is mission critical to make sure that lovable stars, which are giving 150% every day, are surrounded by other lovable stars because there's nothing more frustrating to a lovable star than when they're giving you 150% and they look over and the next person is only giving 25%."

For the generation now entering the industry, Siebert's advice arrives in a single line he has carried for years: "The person with the most information wins." He never held a seasonal job at an amusement park. Instead, he built a body of experience on the business side of the industry, in marketing, design and organizational strategy, at a time when most of his peers were coming up through operations.

"I was hired full-time right away, even before I finished school," he recalled, "because of the unique collection of experiences that I had."

Now, at what he calls the senior side of his career, that accumulated experience is what he most wants to give away. The "caretaker" is his own term for where he finds himself. A steward not just of parks, but of everything he has learned inside them. "My job is to pay as much information forward as I can," he said, "so you don't have to repeat the same mistakes. Hopefully, there are good life lessons that just make your job easier."

The Six Flags-Cedar Fair merger that elevated Siebert to his current role felt comfortable. "It is a giant homecoming," he said, a chance to reunite with colleagues from across the industry's various orbits under one umbrella and unlock what he genuinely believes are the parks' best years ahead.

If you ask Siebert what excites him most right now, and he comes back to conversations like this one, with the next generation figuring out its footing in an industry he loves. That, he said, is the real work of a caretaker. "The best adventures," he said, "are yet to come."

—Jack Lathrop

SAFETY & OPERATIONS

► An Amusement Today exclusive section, dedicated to amusement industry safety, maintenance and operations!

Kissel keeps equipment in top-notch condition at Alabama facility

AT: Ron Gustafson
Special to Amusement Today

CLANTON, Ala. — Safety is the top priority in the amusement industry, and properly maintaining rides and attractions is paramount to meeting that objective.

“We are really proud of what we have created here,” noted **Nicholas Seibert**, chief operations officer at **Kissel Entertainment**, while he discussed the carnival's extensive maintenance facility in Alabama.

“We think we can serve as a great example of what a mobile entertainment company can build from the ground up to ensure their equipment is properly maintained and updated,” he added.

Kissel Entertainment purchased the 15-acre property in 2006 and has expanded the facility to meet the needs of the company, which fields more than 50 rides plus dozens of food and game concessions during its season.

“It was an extremely strategic decision,” **R.A.**



An artist paints a unique dinosaur scene on one of Kissel Entertainment's attractions (above left). The sign on the Raptor Attack amusement ride gets a facelift at the Kissel facility (above right). Workers move a platform inside as winter work continues at the Kissel maintenance facility (below). COURTESY KISSEL ENTERTAINMENT



Kissel, chief innovations officer, said of the Alabama acquisition. Kissel Entertainment, based in Okeana, Ohio, also has a Northern refurbishment facility.

But the Alabama property is where Kissel Entertainment digs in its heels during the offseason to keep its arsenal of gear in top-notch condition.

“The location is climate-friendly, allowing us to store and repair our equipment during the winter without

it being unbearably cold,” Kissel said. “We do not have to worry about salt air damaging equipment if we were to go further south. It is also a centralized location for our route. For the majority of our season, we are able to easily access equipment, tools or the facility from where we are producing events.”

Transformation

According to Kissel, the property was a vehicle transmission shop when the family-owned carnival purchased it.

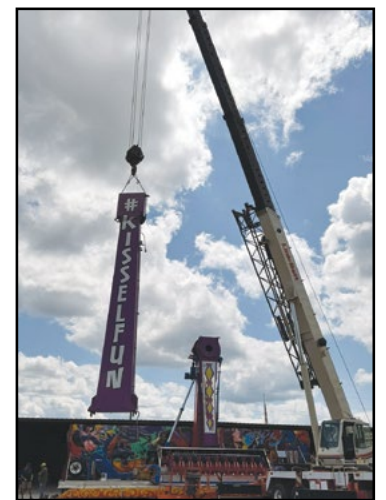
“It has rapidly transformed into what it is today,” he added. “We have extended the footprint to nearby or adjacent properties, which adds 11 acres. We have a main office that houses 10 full-time employees, plus an upstairs for meetings and training. The original shop, which extended from the office, was 5,600 square feet. From that, we have



added six buildings, which added 112,250 square feet to the total portfolio.”

The main shop building, with a 45-foot ceiling, allows the company to bring in large equipment, where it can get a simple freshening or total rebuild. Inside areas are dedicated to metal fabrication, electrical and lighting, body and fiberglass work, vehicle maintenance, tool management and industrial coating.

“This facility reflects our investment in our core



A crane does some heavy lifting on a major ride component at the Kissel Entertainment maintenance facility. COURTESY KISSEL ENTERTAINMENT

► See **KISSEL**, page 44



The Kissel property in Alabama hosts a huge maintenance building where most of the carnival's equipment is maintained. COURTESY KISSEL ENTERTAINMENT

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The maintenance team at Kissel Entertainment (above left) keeps the mobile midway supplier's attractions in top shape. The team includes Jessica Luchenburg (above middle) who serves as materials preparation supervisor. Kissel Entertainment's giant Venetian Wheel is stored under cover during the winter season (above right). COURTESY KISSEL ENTERTAINMENT

► **KISSEL**
Continued from page 43

values as a company," Seibert asserted. "Safety is the most important. Our equipment is properly stored, cared for, checked and updated to ensure it functions properly."

Set Agenda

The busy offseason starts with mandatory yearly inspections of all of the attractions operated by the company.

"From there, our team of experts determines what refurbishments will be the high priority," Seibert said of the process. "Once we complete all of the necessary updates, we are able to spend the remainder of the winter pursuing creative updates. It is a massive undertaking and the job is never finished, but we are passionate about maintaining the equipment we have invested in."

Kissel's maintenance facility is used at any given time throughout the year, not only to make necessary repairs, but also to store equipment not in use.

"Our entire arsenal can be safely stored here



at one time, including our vehicles, rides, housing trailers, games, food and amenities," Seibert pointed out. "We can erect an entire roller coaster or Astro Wheel on the property, drive semi-trailers into the facility and set up and operate rides as tall as the Pharaoh's Fury (swinging ship) indoors."

Keeping the classics going

While Kissel Entertainment fields some of the newest attractions in the industry, the company maintains a number of classic rides as well. Among the classics are a pair of rare Astro Wheels and a Rotor (Chance Rides), Rock-O-Plane (Eyerly Aircraft) and Scat (Venture).

"Our classic rides come from a time when equipment was built to stand the test of time," Kissel said. "They are a testament to quality craftsmanship,



Nicolaas Naude is a technician on the Kissel Entertainment maintenance crew (above left). R.A. Kissel, chief innovation officer with Kissel Entertainment, is shown in his office with a painting in the background of the family carnival as it appeared decades ago (above right). COURTESY KISSEL ENTERTAINMENT

engineering and American innovation. We see it as our duty to continue to care for these rides so they can continue making memories for generations of families."

The company uses a number of qualified suppliers to keep those iconic rides turning, including **Showmen Supplies**, La Porte, Indiana.

"They are a year-round partner for sourcing hard-to-find parts and a business we have trusted for years," Kissel explained.

Proper maintenance also requires skilled personnel to accomplish the job.

"Our employees are specialized in a number of skills that ensure we give our equipment the holistic

attention it deserves. We employ welders, painters, electricians, CDL drivers and experts in highly-specific equipment," Seibert emphasized.

Newer technology

Many of the newer rides have incorporated the latest technology, including touchscreen operator panels and variable frequency drives. With those components come a set of unique maintenance challenges.

"We have great relationships with the manufacturers of those rides that have pulled us into this process early on," Seibert said of the evolving technology. "This has been crucial in

ensuring we know the equipment we are purchasing from start to finish.

"We regularly travel to their facilities when we order rides. I was just at **Reverchon** in France this winter and we have traveled to Turkey to visit manufacturers, to Italy to visit **Gosetto** and to the Netherlands to see **KMG**."

Setting the record straight

When *Amusement Today* asked if there are public misconceptions regarding mobile ride safety, Seibert offered the following: "Yes, it is absolutely a misconception. Safety is not only critical, it is also constant. We do daily inspections at every level, from the firsthand operator to the supervisor to external safety inspectors. Our inspection program is extremely intense."

He added that the Kissel maintenance facility is a "crucial component to our safety inspections, because it gives us the space and opportunity to ensure every element — no matter how small — is being properly cared for and maintained."

● kisselentertainment.com



The framework of the huge Python roller coaster is erected during the offseason at the Alabama facility (above left). Spare parts are stored at the facility so work can be accomplished year-round (above right). COURTESY KISSEL ENTERTAINMENT



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Nearly 300 attend the 2026 Pennsylvania Ride Safety Seminar

AT: B. Derek Shaw
bdshaw@amusementtoday.com



HARRISBURG, Pa. — The Pennsylvania Ride Safety Seminar, held each spring and fall, trains and tests hundreds of amusement ride inspectors in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and beyond. During the March 3-5 event, 270 people from various amusement operations/attractions received ride safety training and testing conducted by third-party operator Slaggert Risk Management for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Bureau of Ride and Measurement Standards. Classroom participants were primarily from Pennsylvania and neighboring states; all told, there were attendees/instructors from a dozen states.

The spring session provided 235 hours of instruction over the three days. Seminar participants selected the specialty courses they felt most beneficial for their career path, job description, abilities and employer benefit. Some of the course

areas included amusement, FEC and carnival rides; inflatables, extreme sports; regulations, inspections and compliance; water attractions; maintenance; go karts; zip lines and climbing walls. The active shooter course, presented by the Pennsylvania State Police, is always a popular session.

"Things went very well. This was a great seminar. It was one of the larger ones we have done in the number of class hours," said Phil Slaggert, seminar coordinator. "We had a record number of presentations. Everything went very smoothly. Our partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has never been stronger, led by director Tammy Luckenbill and supervisor Randall Arndt. Their office staff and their instructors do an outstanding job promoting safety in amusement rides and devices in the



There were 270 attendees from 12 states along with 78 volunteer instructors and staff at the spring Pennsylvania Ride Safety seminar. The three-day training offered 235 classroom hours for attendees to select from. C.W. Craven, owner of Skyride Enterprises, Inc., provided an introduction to ASTM-F24 standards (below). AT/B. DEREK SHAW

commonwealth. Our job is to supplement and support their efforts by providing the continuing education that's mandated by their regulations for either new or renewal amusement ride inspectors."

"The ultimate goal of the biannual safety seminars is to ensure that the public has a safe and fun experience in Pennsylvania, while enjoying a day at the amusement park, carnival, fair, water park, zipline or other adventure," said Luckenbill.









The 78 instructors and staff, who traveled from across the country, are all volunteers with a wide spectrum of specialties that impact the amusement industry. Testing was offered for Class 1 and 2
▶ See SEMINAR, page 48

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A key pertaining to specialty license course offerings at the event is part of the master schedule for the three days and 235 hours of instruction (above). At left is the seminar's Quality Assurance team in Pennsylvania which includes (l to r) Dennis Paczkowski, Paul Ondo, Randall Arndt, Tony Catalano and Leonard Adams, III. Arndt is the division supervisor, while the other four are amusement ride inspectors. AT/B. DEREK SHAW



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600	\$600	\$600	\$600	\$600	\$600
800	\$800	\$800	\$800	\$800	\$800
1000	\$1000	\$1000	\$1000	\$1000	\$1000

A popular session is presented via a Jeopardy-style format with topics such as Pennsylvania regulations, extreme sports, go-karts and walk-throughs.
AT/B. DEREK SHAW

SEMINAR

Continued from page 46

ride inspectors, general qualified inspectors and specialized inspectors. The Pennsylvania certification is recognized in many states, including the Recognized Certified Maintenance Technician program in place in New Jersey.

One of the instructors, **Jim Werner**, operations manager for **Pennhurst Asylum** haunted attractions as well as general manager of **Reaper's Revenge**, both in eastern Pennsylvania, spoke about his take on the training program. "Pennsylvania has always been the flag bearer when it comes to the safety standards across the amusement industry. I will tell you they are second to none. Truthfully, the Department of Ag and what they have built here, in my opinion, is the crowning jewel of the best-case scenario for getting safety [information] out and reinforcing those lessons. It is a worthy program and worthy of everyone's time."

Since 1984, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has inspected and registered amusement rides under the Amusement Ride Safety Act and regularly participates in education and outreach seminars that include classes and hands-on demonstrations. The next Pennsylvania Ride Safety Seminar is scheduled for November 10 to 12 at the Red Lion Hotel and Conference Center, Harrisburg, just off I-283 on Lindle Road.

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47th NWSC Safety Seminar welcomes attendees to new venue

AT: Pam Sherborne
psherborne@amusementtoday.com

PORTLAND, Ore. — Even though the same high-quality instructors were on hand addressing the top needs of attendees in the amusement industry through educational classes, the 47th version of the Northwest Showmen's Club (NWSC) Safety Seminar, held February 16-20, 2026, sure felt different to attendees.

After 28 years, it was not held on the grounds of Funtastic Shows, Portland, Oregon, or chaired by that show's co-owner, Beverly Burback. The seminar was held at the Embassy Suites Hotel Portland Airport and the new chair is Theresa Spromberg, who took over as chair when Burback retired after the 2025 seminar.

"The 2026 NWSC safety seminar turned out very well, for being held at a new location and new committee," Spromberg said. "We had a lot of compliments from students and instructors who had attended in the past."

Spromberg said attendance this year was approximately 100. There were 39 classes presented.

Aside from providing attendees with crucial information regarding the



Beverly Burback (third from left front row above) — co-owner of Funtastic Shows and former chair of the Northwest Showmen's Club Safety Chair for 28 years — wanted to give the seminar instructors a token of their appreciation of all the years they have volunteered at the seminar. They all received an apple for the teacher (below), so to speak. COURTESY NWSC

operation and safety of rides and equipment, the seminar also brings in a fire safety company with a simulator that the students can use to put out a fire.

Also, this year, information was given in a presentation on the Americans with Disabilities Act, Oregon Department, with attendees given the latest updates on the rights of people with disabilities. NWSC's Tracy Munroz said, "There are a lot of service dogs that want to ride the ride with their owners, and we will learn how to decline this request respectfully."

The NWSC Safety Seminar is aligned with Portland Community College for accreditation

in their Continuing Education Program (CEU), providing four CE's for participation and completion of the seminar.

Classes ran from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served each day free to attendees.

Attendees were still treated to four days of classes, with the final day set aside for testing in AIMS, NARRSO or CPE, First Aid on Friday.

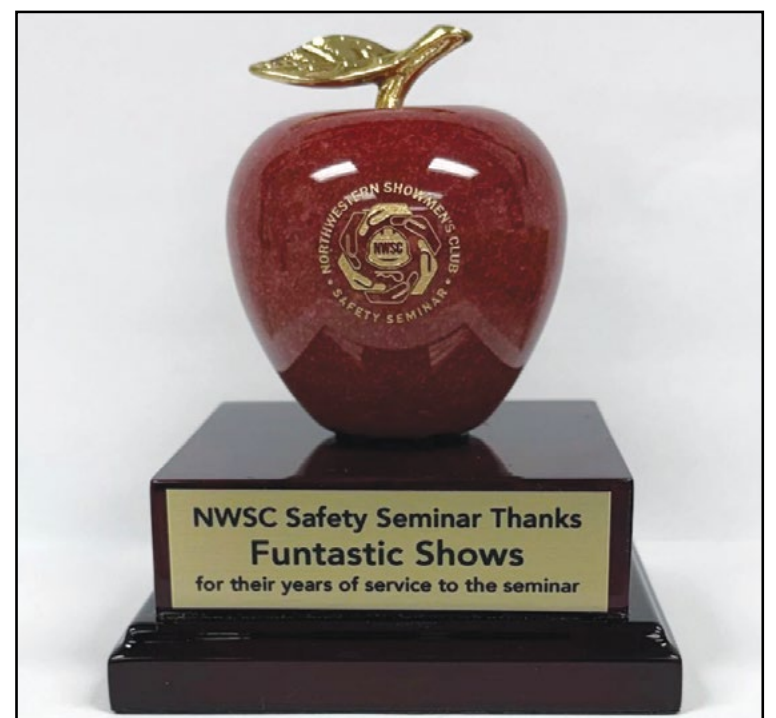
"At the opening of this year's seminar, Bev Burback awarded a red marbled apple trophy, thanking the teachers for donating their time and knowledge each year," Munroz said. "Bev said she wanted to present the teachers with an apple.

"Bev also said she enjoyed how much impact this seminar has had on the industry," Munoz said. "She said the NWSC seminar is really geared for the boots-on-the-ground employees that are working on the rides and keeping them safe."

Munoz added that gearing the seminar to those on site, "boots on the ground," is what makes the NWSC different from all others.

"We work with the employees who are going to be assembling the metal and putting our guests into motion," she said.

Each year, the NWSC



surveys attendees so that it can address their needs, tweaking the educational sessions and customizing schedules to fit attendees' needs.

NWSC's safety seminar offers instructors who come from all aspects of the amusement business to teach students their expertise in the fields in which they specialize. It can range from working with the proper tool to accident prevention.

A sampling of speakers, according to the NWSC website, included Avery Wheellock, who has 40-plus years' experience working to safely erect and dismantle, operate, repair and inspect all types of amusement rides and electrical and mechanical equipment. Others include

Drew Tewksbury, director, sales and marketing, McGowan Allied Specialty Insurance; John Lamoreaux, Funtastic Shows electrician and interactive amusement device inspections, with 38 years in the industry; Ronald E. Burback, current president of Funtastic Shows and president of the Carnival Guild and Patty Sullivan, Eli Bridge Company.

The NWSC Safety Seminar was established to promote continuing education by amusement industry professionals. The interactive classes and hands-on settings deliver the ideal venues for raising the level of safety awareness within the carnival industry.

•nwshowmensclub.com



The Northwest Showmen's Club Safety Seminar — which was held February 16-20 — drew about 100 attendees and presented 39 sessions. The seminar prides itself on a boots-on-the-ground approach with its educational sessions. COURTESY NWSC



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AIMS International announces new board leadership

AIMS International has announced new leadership for its board of directors, with **Randall Wilke** assuming the role of board president, **Michelle Faulk** named vice president, and **Andrew Wheeler** joining the board as a new director. The appointments take effect on April 1.

Wilke succeeds **Pat Hoffman**, who served as board president for the past two years and helped guide the organization through a period of continued growth and global engagement in amusement safety education. This marked Hoffman's third term leading the board. Wilke most recently served as vice president and has been an active contributor to AIMS International's mission to improve safety in the amusement industry through leadership in action.

"Pat's leadership has helped strengthen AIMS International's role as a global resource for safety education and certification," Wilke said. "I'm honored to step into this role and continue working with our board,

volunteers and members to expand access to education, support industry professionals and advance the culture of safety across our industry."

As part of the leadership transition, Falk has been named vice president of the board. An active supporter of AIMS International, she brings industry insight and leadership experience that will help support the organization's continued expansion of safety education initiatives worldwide.

The organization also announced the appointment of Wheeler to its board of directors, replacing Monty Jasper of **Six Flags Entertainment Corporation**. Wheeler currently serves as corporate vice president of general services at **United Parks & Resorts** and brings more than 25 years of experience in the amusement and attractions industry.

Since beginning his career in 1998 at **Six Flags AstroWorld**, Wheeler has held roles across multiple companies and parks,

with experience spanning construction, engineering, maintenance, operations, safety and human resources.

"I'm honored to join the AIMS International Board and support the organization's mission to advance safety education across the industry," Wheeler said. "Throughout my career, I've been passionate about bringing new attractions to life and using innovative solutions to solve long-standing challenges while ensuring both new and legacy attractions continue operating safely for future generations."

Wilke noted that the strength of AIMS International comes from the expertise and dedication of industry professionals who volunteer their time to support safety education.

"Michelle's leadership and Andrew's broad operational experience will be valuable assets to the board as we continue expanding our programs and impact worldwide," he said.

Space for this AIMS page is provided courtesy of *Amusement Today* as a corporate partner of AIMS Intl. Content is provided by AT & AIMS.

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Six Flags Great Adventure opening with enhancements, additions

AT: Pam Sherborne
 psherborne@amusementtoday.com

JACKSON TOWNSHIP, N.J. — The 2026 season has brought to **Six Flags Great Adventure**, Jackson Township, New Jersey, a number of visible improvements across the park. According to **Ryan Eldredge**, public relations manager for Six Flags Great Adventure, it is just the beginning of what guests will see over the next few years.

Six Flags Great Adventure opened for the 2026 season on March 28.

Enhancements and additions this year are touching the Wild Safari Adventure and the park's El Toro roller coaster. They are showing up in live entertainment and the park's Boardwalk section. There have also been changes made to food and beverage offerings. Park officials are enhancing Wi-Fi connectivity in the park.

"The story is always about the future," Eldredge



Six Flags Great America's El Toro roller coaster underwent track maintenance this offseason, with several pieces of the track replaced to deliver a smoother, fast ride experience (above left). Located behind the park's iconic fountain, a new larger live entertainment stage has been added to the park for expanded live entertainment. COURTESY SIX FLAGS

said. "Guests are always excited to see what's new and, over the next several seasons, they'll see a number of meaningful additions that continue to evolve the park experience."

Eldredge said the El Toro coaster received major track improvements for this season. New track pieces were installed to deliver a smoother, faster ride experience.

"As part of our ongoing commitment to maintaining world-class thrills, El Toro

received targeted track enhancements," he said. "The work was completed by our maintenance and engineering teams in partnership with industry specialists."

El Toro opened to the public in 2006. It has a height of 181 feet with a 76-degree drop. Its maximum speed is 70 mph. It was manufactured by **Intamin**, which subcontracted with **Rocky Mountain Construction** to build it on site.

The Safari Off-Road



offering an immersive and educational tour led by a safari team.

The Wild Safari Adventure is home to more than 1,200 animals from six continents, including elephants, rhinos, tigers, giraffes and lions. Guests view expansive habitats aboard a rugged, open-air vehicle and it is included with park admission.

Guests can also visit the Wild Safari Base Camp, located at the main safari entrance, where they'll find animal encounters, educational presentations and standalone safari experiences independent of the amusement park. Guests can also extend their adventure with an overnight stay at Savannah Sunset Resort, which offers glamping-style accommodations.

Officials at Six Flags Great Adventure are looking forward to presenting an expanded live entertainment series to

Adventure will once again operate from inside the theme park this season, something the park had done but discontinued in 2019.

"We have brought that back," Eldredge said.

This enhancement allows guests to board guided safari trucks directly from the park and travel through the 350-acre Wild Safari. This integrated experience has long been a guest favorite because it brings visitors close to the animals while

► See **ADVENTURE**, page 52

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► **ADVENTURE**

Continued from page 51

guests on its new, larger stage located behind the park's iconic fountain. This stage is designed to accommodate a variety of performances and special programming and will become a central gathering spot.

The Boardwalk area at Six Flags Great Adventure is beginning a multi-year transformation designed to capture the energy and nostalgia of a classic Jersey shore boardwalk while introducing new experiences for today's guests.

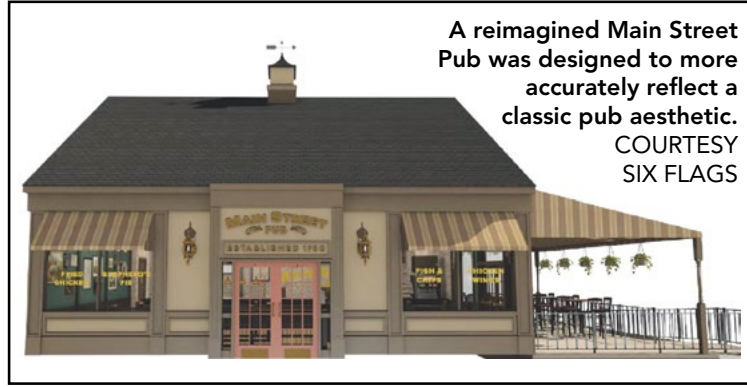
Eldredge said the vision is to create a vibrant midway filled with lights, music, games, food and attractions that evoke the feeling of strolling along a coastal boardwalk.

"The project will roll out in phases over the next several seasons and includes updates to dining locations, retail, entertainment spaces and rides," he said.

Guests will begin to see early elements of this transformation this season, including improvements to the midway, refreshed food locations, new retail offerings and continued enhancements that help bring the boardwalk atmosphere to life.

"As part of this evolving area, several new ride experiences are planned to debut in late spring, with additional details to be shared soon," Eldredge said.

Aside from the food changes to the Boardwalk area, food and beverage enhancements in other areas were also made for



A reimagined Main Street Pub was designed to more accurately reflect a classic pub aesthetic. COURTESY SIX FLAGS

this season. These included a transition of Best of the West restaurant to Best of the West: Smokehouse. This food location has introduced bold, house-smoked barbecue flavors and hearty classics to elevate the guest experience. The park's Main Street Pub was reimagined to more accurately reflect a classic pub aesthetic, serving as a high-energy, walk-up location for guests seeking quick service

and a refreshed menu inspired by traditional pub fare.

These enhancements were led by Executive Chef **Jeremy Hacker**, who continues to create new food concepts that are designed to meet the pace of a day at the park.

Guests will soon experience faster, more reliable connectivity across the destination as part of a major Wi-Fi enhancement initiative. The installation

includes more than 600 new access points, delivering 5G-speed internet across all the park as well as Safari Off-Road Adventure and Hurricane Harbor. These updates will improve mobile app performance, in-park communications, content sharing and guest experiences.

As previously announced, Six Flags Great Adventure will debut a major new roller coaster in 2027. Track pieces had already arrived by the opening of the 2026 season.

"At this time, we're keeping many of the details under wraps, including the manufacturer and ride statistics, but it will be a headline attraction and part of a broader multi-year investment in the park," Eldredge said.

● sixflags.com

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MOBILE MIDWAYS

► Amusement Today's all-new section featuring news from carnival owners, fairs and festivals!

Heat, rain, immigration issues dampen Riverside County Fair

Butler Amusements brings 26 rides to 13-day fair, festival

AT: B. Derek Shaw
bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

INDIO, Calif. — Several days of rain, four days of record-breaking heat, and a second consecutive year of community fears over potential immigration enforcement activity at large events dampened strong opening attendance numbers and record ticket presales. Even with those challenges, the **Riverside County Fair & National Date Festival** welcomed over 240,000 during the 13-day, mid-to-late-February event.

The theme this year was “Return to the Oasis.”

“The 2026 fair presented a new set of challenges, with fluctuating temperatures and unpredictable weather. Rain on Presidents’ Day was a significant setback; however, the addition of a third weekend — implemented last year — once again proved invaluable in helping offset the impact of inclement conditions,” said Sean



Butler, COO, Butler Amusements.

“The Fair & Date Fest continues to stand out not only as the county’s premier celebration of community achievement, but as a powerful economic driver in the valley,” said **Chris Pickering**, CEO.

A recent third-party survey by **Johnson Consulting** revealed the event delivers \$92.4 million in economic impact, sustaining 600 ongoing jobs and creating \$31 million in wages.

Butler Amusements again provided the midway, bringing 26 rides to that spot, with 16 catering to kids. New to the fair and festival this year were Soundwave (**ARM Rides**), an Alibaba-style ride and Pole Position roller coaster (**Fabbri Group**). The more



The Riverside County Fair & National Date Festival welcomed more than 240,000 people during the 13-day mid-to-late-February event. COURTESY RIVERSIDE COUNTY FAIR & NATIONAL DATE FESTIVAL

popular rides included Giant Wheel (**Chance Rides**), Inversion (**KMG Rides**) and Pole Position. There were also 342 games and 19 food stands.

“We have proudly served as the carnival provider for the Riverside County Fair for nearly 30 years, and we’ve built a strong, collaborative relationship with the current management team

at **Pickering Events**,” said Butler. “Their staff have proven to be excellent stewards of the fairgrounds, and we work closely together not only to plan future fairs, but also to promote each year’s event throughout the local community and across the Inland Empire.”

“Butler Amusements continues to provide a beautiful, clean and safe carnival for our guests year after year. Our event’s February dates allow us unique access to such a premier midway provider, who also serves the **California State Fair**,” said Pickering. “Despite serious issues with the H-2B visa program this year, their team delivered a spectacular show.”

Pickering likes what sets this event apart from others. “Everyone has a county fair; there’s only one National Date Festival. Each concessionaire is required to offer a date item on their menu. We produce a printed ‘Date Treat Finder’ with item descriptions and a number-coded map. We also provide

three-by-two-foot signs for each concessionaire to display, highlighting their date treat and its corresponding number on the printed checklist.”

Special promotions included 35,000 fourth-grade students across 143 schools, who received complimentary admission tickets. Veterans and first responders received free admission to the event through **VetTix/1stTix**. In addition, 3,071 students attended free educational field trips, augmented by the new STEM at the Dair & Date Fest Guide sponsored by the **California Date Commission**. Also, \$26,000 in scholarship money was awarded to 16 graduating seniors.

In addition to traditional advertising buys across television, radio and print, the media mix incorporated social media, programmatic display and digital out-of-home. **Meta** and **Google** delivered the strongest results, driving the most engagement and ticket traffic.

In the food arena, a new



Butler Amusements was the midway provider, bringing 40 rides with 16 kiddie rides. COURTESY RIVERSIDE COUNTY FAIR & NATIONAL DATE FESTIVAL

► See **RIVERSIDE**, page 54

►RIVERSIDE

Continued from page 53

hit was Tanghulu, a candied fruit on a stick, along with Korean corndogs. Unique items tied in with the date festival theme: date beer-battered corndog; date dry rub chicken wings, date Dole whip; deep-fried dates and even a date shake. Of course, popular classics are the country fair cinnamon rolls, along with a new Tres Leches cake flavor.

Highlights included the debut of the **National Date Festival Museum** in collaboration with the **Coachella Valley History Museum and Deserted Films** and the grand opening of the **Oasis Lounge & Tiki Bar** featuring a new Luau stage with daily hula lessons and nightly fire performances. Two new mascots were introduced this year: Sunny the Date and Cindy the Cinnamon Roll.

The Date Pageant, California's second-longest-running outdoor play, continued with the sultan searching for his "perfect date." Also, 927 community performers were showcased on the City of Indio Celebration Stage.

Entertainment included monster trucks, demolition derby and **Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association Pro Rodeo**. Also, a Gran Jarriepo-Tardeada was



Butler Amusements has played Riverside County Fair for nearly 30 years. Since 1947, the annual festival has been held to celebrate the date palm harvest in the Coachella Valley. COURTESY RIVERSIDE COUNTY FAIR & NATIONAL DATE FESTIVAL, BUTLER AMUSEMENTS

held, which is a traditional Mexican rodeo-style festival that includes bull riding along with music. The entertainment featured included **Roberto Tapia** and **Montez de Durango**.

The federal government shutdown last October created a backlog at the **Department of Homeland Security**, pushing H-2B visa approvals into the spring. Many of their business partners relied more heavily on the local labor pool than in years past. To assist, their team added available opportunities to their own seasonal hire application.

"At the Riverside County Fair, nearly 40% of our ride staff and 50% of our food and game employees were local or temporary hires sourced through **TalentMovers**," said Butler.



"Despite these challenges, our team rose to the occasion. With the support of the next generation of our family and the dedication of our management staff, we were able to deliver a successful fair. Special recognition goes to Chris Pickering and the entire team at Pickering Events for their partnership,

flexibility and commitment throughout a very challenging labor season."

"The Fair was awesome! 78 years in the making and representing the heart of the Coachella Valley and Riverside County, celebrating our agricultural roots, supporting our students, highlighting local talent and

bringing people together," said 4th District County Supervisor **V. Manuel Perez**.

Since 1947, the annual festival has been held to celebrate the date palm harvest in the Coachella Valley. The fair and festival return February 11 through 28, 2027.

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The more popular rides included the Chance Giant Wheel, KMG Inversion and Fabbri Group Pole Position roller coaster. COURTESY RIVERSIDE COUNTY FAIR & NATIONAL DATE FESTIVAL

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Cold temps early on account for dips during at Florida State Fair

New advertising, marketing campaign earns fair high praise

AT: Ron Gustafson
Special to Amusement Today

TAMPA, Fla. — “Unprecedented cold” the first weekend of the Florida State Fair, February 5 to 16, accounted for a dip in attendance and midway revenue.

“It was unseasonably cold and windy. The first weekend was tough,” Cheryl Flood, the fair's CEO, told *Amusement Today*. “Attendance was almost 400,000, down slightly from last year due to the unprecedented cold.”

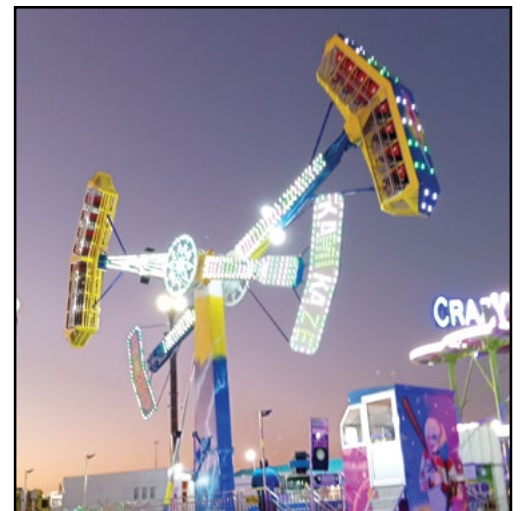
“It was a little bit off from last year, but any year at the Florida State Fair is a great year,” noted Frank Zaitshik, president of midway provider Wade Shows, Livonia, Michigan. “We attribute that (dip in midway revenue) to the extra cold and windy weather the first four days of the fair. We finished very, very strong and that validated that the weather was the overwhelming reason.”

Integrated themes

The 2026 edition of



The sun sets over the midway on a mild evening at the Florida State Fair in Tampa (above left). The new Kamikaze thrill ride (above right) was on the huge midway provided by Wade Shows. The Freedom250 mobile museum (below) treated guests at the Florida State Fair to a history lesson as America celebrates its 250th anniversary. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



the 12-day exposition was themed “America's Sunniest Celebration” and, at the same time, honored America's 250th anniversary throughout the fairgrounds.

“Florida had the unique opportunity to host the first state fair celebrating America250 as part of the 2026 Great American Fair initiative,” Flood noted. “America's Sunniest Celebration provided an ownable thematic that integrated our great fair to the nation's birthday celebration and unified all of the elements of the showcase through cohesive décor, food, music and attractions.”



Complementing the combined themes was the Freedom250 Truck Mobile Museum, which treated guests to an interactive look at the nation's history. Six such mobile museums are touring the nation this

year with stops at national monuments, parks, fairs and other events to mark America's 250th birthday.

“This was the inaugural visit for this vehicle following the official launch,” Flood said of the exhibit.

The mobile museums were created in partnership with PragerU and Hillsdale College and made possible by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Besides banners and other decor reflective of the celebration, the fair also presented a daily 250 Hologram Show in the AG Hall of Fame building.

Praise for publicity

Zaitshik was quick to praise fair officials for pulling out all the stops regarding the event's publicity.

“This was the best job the fair has ever done in advertising, utilizing social media, and reaching out to communities to get involved,” he said. “I'm also very proud of what our staff did to get us moved on a tight schedule and have everything ready in Tampa.”

The midway featured 81 rides in what the show owner said was “the best utilization of space.”

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IAFE Education Foundation receives grant to support America 250

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. — The **IAFE Education Foundation** has commissioned five artists from across the United States to create original works inspired by the theme “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” in celebration of America 250.

This project is supported in part by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.

The artists were selected from among winners of art competitions held at fairs across the country, highlighting the depth of talent within fair communities. The commissioned artists are **Connie Spurgeon** of Idaho, **Brady Scott** of Kansas, **Todd Baxter** of South Carolina, **Janene Grende** of Washington and **Gretchen Parker**, South Carolina.

Each artist will produce three pieces that will be transformed into engaging, family-friendly art activities that fairs of all sizes can download and incorporate into their America 250 celebrations, helping communities connect through creativity and shared experience.

“As chair of the IAFE Education Foundation, I’m proud to commission five artists as part of Celebrating America 250,” said **Andrew Vandepopulier**, chair of the IAFE Education Foundation. “This isn’t just about creating great art — it’s about telling the story of how agriculture has shaped our country over the past 250 years. Fairs have always been where communities come together to celebrate farming, innovation, and youth achievement, and this project brings that spirit to life in a new way. By connecting art and agriculture, we’re helping people of all ages see the impact farmers and ranchers have had — and continue to have — on America’s future.”

This marks the first grant the IAFE Education Foundation has received from the National Endowment for the Arts. The organization is proud to launch a project that supports rural artists while providing fairs across the country with original artwork to inspire family-friendly activities celebrating this milestone in United State’s history.



Five artists have been commissioned to create original works of art for IAFE Education Foundation to celebrate America 250. They are (clockwise from top left) Connie Spurgeon, Brady Scott, Todd Baxter, Janene Grende and Gretchen Parker. COURTESY IAFE EDUCATION FOUNDATION



Guests were welcomed to the Florida State Fair in Tampa with the theme “America’s Sunniest Celebration,” which also honored America’s 250 anniversary. In the background is the gigantic America 250 Wheel, presented by Biggest Wheel, LLC. AT/RON GUSTAFSON

► FLORIDA Continued from page 56

“My favorite ride is the double-deck Venetian carousel (**Chance Rides**), which we showcase in the middle of everything,” Zaitshik said of his ride arsenal.

Spectacular attractions

A new Kamikaze (**Fabripark**) was among the spectacular attractions presented by Wade Shows, along with its Hit In 2000 Himalaya (**Mack Rides**), State Fair Slide (**SBF/Visa**), Wave Swinger (**Bertazzon**), Alpine Bobs (Chance Rides) and Mega Drop (**Fabbi Group**).

Booked-in rides included an X-Drive (**KMG**) themed as Colossus from **Powers Great American Midways**, Whiteville, North Carolina; Crazy Mouse spinning coaster (**Reverchon**), **Wood Entertainment Company**, San Antonio, Texas; a Spinner (**Kolmax Plus**), decked out as Nitro from **Modern Midways**, Dyer, Indiana; New York, New York funhouse (**Gosetto**), Freak Out (**KMG**) and Genesis (**Wisdom Rides of America**), from **Powers & Thomas Midway Entertainment**, Wilmington, North Carolina.

Also, **Iconic Midway Rides’ Marina Zaitshik-Small** and husband, **Johan Small**, presented their giant XXL pendulum (**KMG**) themed as Kraken, 177-foot Thunderbird Swing (**Lamberink**) and Infinity Loop (**Larson International**).

Ride wristbands were \$35 Monday through Thursday, excluding

Presidents Day, February 16. Wristbands were \$45 Friday through Sunday and on Presidents’ Day.

One of the largest portable Ferris wheels in the world, a 230-footer dubbed the **America 250 Wheel**, made its debut at the fair as an added attraction. It is operated by **Biggest Wheel, LLC**, a partnership between Zaitshik and **Michael Wood**, president of Wood Entertainment Company. Riders were charged \$7. (**EDITOR’S NOTE: The forthcoming May edition of Amusement Today will feature an article on the massive wheel.**)

Entertainment included Sea Lion Splash, Racing Corgis, American Daredevil, Circus Hollywood, Water Spectacular and six stages with live music. All were included with fair admission, which ranged from \$3 to \$25, with promotional discounts.

“The America 250th Celebration tied into our state fair was one for the history books,” Flood said. “The Americana theme played into the traditional state fair all Americans feel. Operationally, we had a lot of changes this year with both paid parking and going to a percentage with food. Long term, we will be better for it and able to plan a much more robust state fair in the future that benefits all who participate in our operation.”

More than 250 events are hosted annually at the 337-acre fairgrounds, accounting for 1.75 million visitors. The 2027 Florida State Fair is slated from February 4 to 15.

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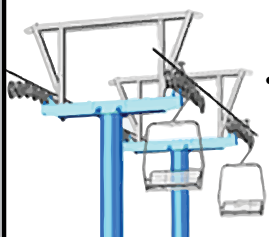
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AT: B. Derek Shaw

bdshaw@amusementtoday.com

Fans of the **San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo** may be happy to learn that it could soon be a year-round event. During a recent vote, San Antonians approved funding for the rodeo to become a permanent fixture. Similar to the experience found at the Fort Worth Stockyards, organizers say year-round rodeo events would bring an economic boost to the Alamo City.

"I tell everybody, hands down, we're the best," CEO and Executive Director **Cody Davenport** told *Spectrum News 1*. "There are so many people now that are calling in and excited. 'We want to come see firsthand what y'all talked about. We want to come witness it.' So, we are very excited based on coming out of that campaign."

The current once-a-year event draws an estimated 1.5 million people every February.

Project Marvel is an initiative to transform the **Freeman Coliseum** and **Frost Bank Center** grounds into a year-round rodeo and stock show. The proposition, passed in November 2025, allocates nearly \$200 million in tax revenue for renovations.

"It's allowing an identity in the Western industry to do these types of things on a year-round basis," Davenport said. "People are excited. I mean, obviously, the vote was evident as far as the excitement, and our community recognizes the opportunity inside that to take care of the East Side, take care of the facilities down here. They all saw the vision."

Davenport said it's a vision of Western culture now popularized thanks to Hollywood.

"They watch *Yellowstone*. They're riding the wave of the industry now," Davenport said. "They can come down and walk into the coliseum and actually see those same things they're seeing on television and say, 'Oh, it's real. It's really happening right here.'"

With the stockyards in Fort Worth being a popular tourist destination as well, Davenport wants San Antonio to be another stop for folks, just like it is during the rodeo circuit.

"What they call the Texas three-step, if you will, is Fort Worth to San Antonio to Houston," said Davenport. "San Antonio to Houston," said Davenport.

Another Pennsylvania carnival has pulled the plug. **Garbrick Amusements**, Centre Hall, Pennsylvania and Bonneau, South Carolina, has shuttered their operation. It is believed that substantially higher insurance premiums may have been one of

the reasons. This is part of the announcement the company made in mid-March, via Facebook: "After 79 years in the business of making smiles, we've decided to turn off the lights and let the motors run dry. To say it was a difficult decision would be a gross understatement. We've loved the life and the people that supported us for so long — they've become family. We want all of you to know that we'll never forget those that have helped us make it happen all these years and hope that you'll understand that we didn't take this decision lightly. Bless all of you and thank you for 79 wonderful years!" (Note: Late last year, *SwikaS Amusements* closed their operation.)

Since 1955, they have been a staple at the **Centre County Grange and Encampment Fair**. More recently, they operated one of the midways with **Bartlebaugh Amusements** anchoring the other. This season, **Sunshine Shows** will take over their spot at that location.

With the two recent closings of Pennsylvania carnivals, there are now 14 based in the state.

Staci McBayer was recently hired by the Bonner County commissioners as manager of the **Bonner County Fair and Sandpoint Rodeo** in Idaho.

McBayer, originally appointed to the fair board last May for a four-year term, was later elected to serve as that board's treasurer. She will step down from the board to accept the manager's position.

"The treasurer's position has allowed me to apply my business acumen to the board's finances. [It's] definitely not a glitzy position, but an absolute critical one that allows the board to make the best financial decisions possible," McBayer told the *Bonner County Daily Bee*.

During her time on the board, she worked on the fair book committee, assisting in updates of class entry information, schedules and sponsorship ads. Other endeavors included promoting fair sponsorships and local business partnerships, which is the main reason that has allowed the fair to be put on.

"What I am looking forward to the most is being able to hit the ground running. Serving on the board has been like months of on-the-job training and has helped me identify several areas we can improve to better serve our community. We have a very synergetic organization right now, from our board members to our staff to our volunteers and community supporters," she said. "It's exciting to transition to this role that allows me to help facilitate our goals on a day-to-day basis!"



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Walk of Fame honors icons of outdoor amusement industry

RIVERVIEW, Fla. — Eastern States Exposition (ESE) will install a permanent walk of fame honoring iconic individuals and organizations associated with the fair and outdoor amusement industries. The announcement was made during a press conference held at the **International Independent Showmen's Association (IISA) Museum**.

Showmen's Park will be built at the ESE fairgrounds in West Springfield, Massachusetts, with an official unveiling slated for the opening day of **The Big E**, September 18. Produced by ESE, The Big E is recognized as the fourth-largest fair in the nation.

The inaugural inductees to the Walk of Fame, also announced at the press conference, are:

Johnny and Tina Doolan, Doolan Amusement Company, Stuart, Florida. Johnny Doolan is also a member of the **Outdoor Amusement Business Association (OABA) Hall of Fame**, inducted in 2014.

Joie Chitwood, Jr., of the former **Joie Chitwood Thrill Show**. The auto stunt spectacular, with its roots in Pennsylvania, thrilled patrons at fairs and racetracks for more than 50 years. The last performances were in 1998.

Bob Commerford, R.W. Commerford and Sons, Goshen, Connecticut. For more than four decades, the Commerfords have produced petting zoos, animal rides and parade attractions. Bob Commerford went into the OABA Hall of Fame in 2007.

Bob and Bea Negus of the former Conklin Shows. The couple worked bingo operations with a variety of carnival companies over the years. Bob Negus (1929-1998) was also in marketing, a member of the OABA Board of Directors and was inducted into the organization's hall of fame in 2003.

Fred Pittroff, creator and manufacturer of the stationary Giant Slide seen at large fairs and amusement parks. Pittroff built his first slide in 1967 and one of his units has operated for more than 50 years at the **Minnesota State Fair**, where he is a member of the fair's hall of fame. He also received OABA's Pioneer Award in 2020, along with other accolades.

North American Midway Entertainment, Farmland, Indiana, is the largest traveling outdoor amusement company in North America, owned by **Danny Huston**.

"When people walk through a fair, they see the lights, the rides, the food, the entertainment, the clean facilities, but they don't always see how interconnected it is. You can't unplug one piece of the equation without compromising the entire event," said **Joe Potillo**, past president of the IISA and owner of **Potillo Specialty Service, Inc.** "Fairs represent billions of dollars in economic activity across this country, and that impact exists because of all of us. Showmen's Park isn't just about honoring history; it's about recognizing the foundation of an industry that supports communities nationwide."

"Riverview, Gibsonton and the surrounding areas have long been home to the American midway," said **Lee Stevens**, two-time past president of the IISA and executive director of the IISA Museum. "This community has served as a base for generations of showmen who play fairs around the country and beyond. The stories of the showman, from all facets of the industry, are preserved in this museum. It's fitting that this announcement takes place here, in a region that truly understands what it takes to build a fair."

—Ron Gustafson

Snapshots from from the AT booth at IISF Trade Show & Extravaganza

RIVERVIEW, Fla. — Many industry friends stopped by to say "hello" and pick up hard copies of the latest editions of *Amusement Today* during the 58th Annual **International Independent Showmen's Foundation Super Trade Show & Extravaganza**, February 10 to 13, in Riverview, Florida. Below are some of the snapshots from the AT booth.



Hunter Novotny (left) and Steven Paquin of Larson International, Plainview, Texas. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Siblings with IISF are Sandy Schmidt, 1st vice president, and Tom Arnold, emeritus supervisor. Schmidt owns T.J. Schmidt & Company, Standish, Michigan, while Arnold owns Arnold Amusements, Traverse City, Michigan. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



From the left: Ossian, Abie and Marcus Danter, Danter Attractions, U.K. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Gary Slade (left), *Amusement Today* publisher, and Les (Corky) Powers, owner of Powers Great American Midways, Whiteville, North Carolina. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Paul (left) and Joel Golder, Palace Playland, Old Orchard Beach, Maine. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Avery Wheelock, president of Worldwide Safety Group, with parents Avery and Melanie. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Hutch Costello, director of sales, Rhode Island Novelty, Fall River, Massachusetts. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Tracy and R.D. Thomas, co-owners of Powers & Thomas Midway Entertainment, Wilmington, North Carolina. AT/RON GUSTAFSON



Marty Biniasz, marketing with Strates Shows, Orlando, Florida. AT/RON GUSTAFSON

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Advertiser Index

ADVERTISER	PAGE#
2026 Golden Ticket Awards	64
AERIA	12
AIMS International	50
ASTM Committee F24	48
Altitude Rides & Attractions	26
ART Engineering	9
ARM	57
Baynum Solutions	48
Chance Rides	3
CPI	47
Eli Bridge Company	54
Embed	23
Fabbri Group	56
Frederiksen Industries, Inc.	58
Gallagher Insurance	61
Gateway Ticketing	13
Get It Done Marketing	18
Gerstlauer Amusement Rides GmbH	15
Great Coasters International	2
Haas & Wilkerson	33
Hodgdon Consulting	26
Hoffman Consulting Group	48
Intermark Ride Group	11
International Rides Management	26
Irvine Ondrey Engineering	48
Kay Park Recreation	7
Kiddie Bumper Boats	24
Kissel Entertainment	45
Kumbak Amusement Engineering	48
Lagotronics Projects	26
LJM & Associates, Inc.	48
Maclan Corporation	51
Montgomery Inn	19
Naughton Insurance, Inc.	18
Northwest Coasters	48
Norton Auctioneers	63
Parks Plus Insurance	4
Premier Rides	43
Ralph S. Alberts	52
Reverchon	60
Rides 4 U	55, 61
S&S Worldwide	46
Sartori Amusement Rides	60
Severn Lamb Trams International	17
Sippers By Design	26
SkyTrans Manufacturing LLC	60
SunKid	48
Swanee River Railroad	18
Talley Amusements Inc.	59
Texas Pete Sauce	35
Valerity Automation	14
VLocker	24
Whitewater West	29
William H. Robinson, Inc.	10
Wiegand Sports USA	18
Wiegand Water Rides	31
World's Largest Swim Lesson	28
Worldwide Safety Group	60
Zamperla	5
Zebec	32

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