

Major project eyed at Howe Caverns

By Edward Munger Jr.

HOWES CAVE – Guests at Howe Caverns could get a taste of adventure, splash in a water park and gaze at 80-foot-long animated dinosaurs under a multimillion-dollar development plan unveiled this week.

Howe Caverns co-owner Emil Galasso said as management at Schoharie County's biggest tourism attraction considered improvements, they polled guests to learn their thoughts, and the variety of additions being considered would answer one of the primary responses from folks who toured the cave system: What else is there to do?

"We went through great pains to try to choose the things that would enhance the enjoyment based on our interviews with the people in the parking lot," Galasso said.

Under a master plan going under review, the natural attraction would add a dinosaur canyon, an entertainment building with a 4-D theater (3-D plus atmospheric effects in the theater), a flight simulator and laser stone engraving.

A recreational vehicle park would accommodate as many as 200 campers and would be open year-round to cater to snowmobilers enjoying the region's trail system in the winter.

Other elements of the proposal include:

A new 24,600-square-foot Dinosaur Canyon Visitor Center that would sit beside a 120-foot deep pit with a family lake, surrounded by meandering walkways with animated replicas of dinosaurs including the tyrannosaurus rex.

A new tot lot and kiddie park and a 250-room hotel connected to a 50,000-square-foot indoor water park.

A new 2,500-square-foot gemstone building with an outdoor area where children can pan for gemstones.

A zip line ride that would suspend riders as much as 60 feet above the ground for a 2,500-foot ride down a hill at up to 40 mph.

A mountain coaster that would place riders on sleds moving at 25 mph down a hillside and back up the hill.

A tree canopy tour, described as an aerial adventure course in the woods north of the Howe Caverns main building. Guests tethered to a safety cable would test their agility, endurance and confidence moving through an obstacle course above ground.

A remote control area that would feature radio-controlled cars and boats and a hobby shop for remote control enthusiasts.

A winter sports area that would give adults and children a wintertime site for tubing and snowboarding.

Picnic areas, a natural rock climbing wall and a rock maze made of massive stones.

Howe Caves Development LLC is applying for local approval for a Planned Development District encompassing more than 330 acres surrounding the cave system.

Howe Caverns draws about 160,000 guests each year. Under estimates in the plan, the number of tourists would triple to close to a half-million.

"It is exciting because it is a significant investment in a tourism attraction like Schoharie County hasn't seen in well over a decade, if not two decades," County Planning and Development Director Alicia Terry said Wednesday.

"We're just not seeing projects of this magnitude being proposed in the county," she said.

Regulatory process

The project will require two zoning amendments, Terry said – one to change the zoning map to add the Planned Development District, the other to adopt a schedule of uses within the PDD.

The Cobleskill Town Board is acting as lead agency in the environmental review process, and the county Planning Commission will also have to review the site plan, she said.

Cobleskill Town Supervisor Thomas Murray said he expects several layers of government to scrutinize the project in an effort to avoid any negative impacts to the community.

“Every step of the way, everything that they want to do has to be presented to us and then we have to look at every one,” Murray said.

“Personally, I feel really good about all the hoops that we have to jump through. There may be things local government may not see or realize. We’ve got a triple-check system, and I feel really good about it,” Murray said.

The project, which could take up to 10 years to come to fruition, would add hundreds of thousands of dollars in new revenue for the town, county and school district, Murray said.

Depending on project approvals, some of the amusement features, including the zip line and mountain coaster, could be constructed by the end of this year, and the dinosaur canyon could be complete by 2012.