

Howe Caverns unveils huge plans

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The owners of Howe Caverns, which this year marks the 200th birthday of discoverer Lester Howe, have big plans for the next 200 years.

In a request to the Town of Cobleskill for a zoning change on the 330-acre Howes Cave site, Howe Caverns Development LLC details plans that include:

- Dinosaur Canyon, a visitor's center with retail space, ticketing, concessions and "full-sized animatronic replicas of such species as Diplodocus, Triceratops, Pterandon...and Tyrannosaurus Rex."
- A new entertainment building with an arcade, 4-D theater, flight simulators, laser stone drawing and a dark ride.
- A year-round two to three-acre RV park for 175-200 recreational motor homes.
- A 40 mph zipline, 25mph mountain coaster, Tree Canopy Tour, and water sports area.
- A new gemstone mining building, outdoor playground, rock climbing walls, rock maze, winter sports area, remote control area, picnic area, and new maintenance facility.
- And, depending on "future demand and economic conditions" a 250-room hotel and attached 50,000 square-foot indoor water park.

Despite—or maybe because of New York State's economic woes--Howe Caverns General Manager Bob Holt said attendance there has been increasing.

"Our numbers were up about 13,000 last year; people are staying closer to home," Mr. Holt said.

"And one thing we always hear is, 'What else is there to do?' People will stay longer is there is more here."

According to the binder submitted to the Planning Board detailing the project, it would be financed with owner equity and private financing, and Mr. Holt said they're still putting together final cost figures.

The project is expected to create 300 new jobs and an additional 450 jobs at local businesses.

If the hotel and water park are built, that would mean an additional 350 fulltime jobs.

According to the application, Howe Caverns currently draws about 160,000 visitors a year; the new attractions are projected to boost that number to approximately 500,000.

While some of the new attractions would be seasonal, others would be open year-round.

Construction is proposed to begin late this year with the amusement components, including the zipline and mountain coaster opening in 2011 and Dinosaur Canyon completed by December 2012.

Developers are in the process of seeking Empire Zone certification for the 300 proposed new jobs, and though they have not yet submitted an application to the Schoharie County IDA, they may seek assistance in the form of exemptions to the mortgage recording tax and state and local sales tax for construction-related project costs.

The centerpiece Dinosaur Canyon would be located east of Discovery Drive and southeast of the existing Howe Caverns building

A pedestrian path and bridge would connect the two facilities.

The 22,000 square-foot entertainment Building would be located to the north; a Tot Lot and Kiddie Park would be to the east.

The more-tentative hotel and water park would be located on the western portion of the site with direct access to Caverns and Sagendorf Corners Road.

The site is currently zoned for a variety of uses, but the change to PDD would be required for the amusement attractions and the RV and water parks.

A little more than half of the site's 330 acres would remain undeveloped with 30 percent remaining open or recreational space.

The proposed project includes a new water system, a new sewer system—including a sewer plant—and new electric and communications systems.

Discovery Drive will remain the primary road into the Caverns, although some modification will be required. There will be on-site shuttles.

Two years ago, stockholders sold Howe Caverns to Emil Galasso of Cobleskill and Charles Wright of Schoharie, the men pledged to invest millions of dollars in the world-famous tourist attraction over the coming years.

That was followed a year later by word that the developers of Six Flags Theme Parks was interested in building a \$75 million hotel and water park at the Caverns.

That project was put on hold last April because of the faltering economy.

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