



THE Billion- Dollar BEACON

BY SARA C.
SHOEMAKER

Sevier County's
Highway 66
undergoes a transformation
from drive-thru to destination

Whether it's called Highway 66, Winfield Dunn Parkway or the Gateway to the Smokies, the nine-mile stretch through Sevier County from Interstate 40 has long been considered a big parking lot thanks to the 12 million annual visitors on their way to the Great Smoky Mountains. Now, real estate developers are eyeing this mostly sparse section of roadway as the county's newest hot spot.

The corridor has been labeled the "billion-dollar highway"—meaning the culmination of current and planned projects would total \$1 billion. This number may be subjective, but when one takes a closer look, the billion-dollar reference could prove a gross underestimation.

It's uncharacteristic for the friendly Sevier County natives to boast. Yet, one of the first major projects to break ground along the highway, the Sevierville Events Center at Bridgemont, is projected to reach \$1 billion after its 10-year build-out, which will include a luxury hotel, condominiums, water parks and golf courses spanning across hundreds of acres.

More noise is coming from a massive earth-moving job at the Exit 407, clearing the way for a 109-acre retail development called Dumplin Creek. The completed upscale shopping center could easily capture \$400 million, says developer John Turley of First Commercial Real Estate, who is also responsible for Knoxville's Turkey Creek project.

"There are plenty of projects going on, and lots that are under the radar. People are scoping it out," says Allen Newton, executive director of the Sevier County Economic Development Council.

Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge are approaching a saturation point, and the cost of available land there has increased dramatically. "The redevelopment that's going on [in these two towns] is more expensive than new development" in Sevierville, says Ken Maples, developer of Whispering Pines condos and a Pigeon Forge native.

But even before Hwy. 66's wide-open spaces became a billion-dollar beacon, the city of Sevierville smartly designated the entire thoroughfare, including properties around Exit 407 off I-40, as a Tourism Development Zone.

"Sales tax revenues from the zone, from new [businesses], can be used to pay on the bond issue," says Sevierville city administrator Doug Bishop, adding that the city is spending \$75 million for new roads and is pushing the state to widen the highway to six lanes.

Certainly alleviating traffic congestion is crucial, but attracting workers to fill the thousands of jobs being created is what's on Newton's mind. Sevier County businesses pull people from its four surrounding counties—Knox, Blount, Jefferson and Cocke. Newton says it's still not enough. "Bridgemont alone will have an estimated 3,000 employees over a three- to four-year period," he adds.

The Sevier County ECD will soon launch a full-scale workforce development study; in the meantime, the council has been testing programs like the Sevier First Smart Card. Underwritten by Knoxville-based Cariten Healthcare, the card is available to any Sevier County business that allows employers to offer benefits to its part-time and seasonal employees.

"We're trying to [help] employee retention and reduce job hopping. In a tourism market, that's the nature of the business," Newton says.

The number of projects on tap for Hwy. 66 reflects developer confidence in Sevierville as the city braces for another 10 to 15 years' worth of expansion. But, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. Could the day come when this building bubble will burst?

Maples cautiously says "no," because even in times of national economic lows, Sevier County tourism prevails. "History shows that people will still take a vacation. They just may not stay as long," he adds.

Let's hope that is a billion-dollar guarantee. **tn**

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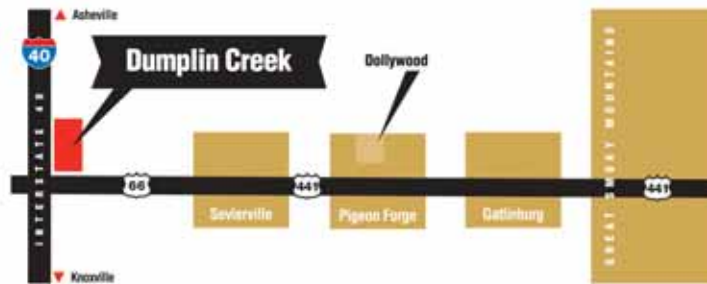
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Believe it or not... Ripley's is serious business

When most people think of Ripley's in Tennessee, they think of shrunken heads, haunted adventures or other "odditoriums" dotting the landscape along the edge of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Caught up in the fantastical nature of the company's numerous venues, it might not immediately occur to travelers, or even business types on vacation, that Ripley's represents a nearly \$100 million investment in the state. Or that it employs around 400 people, ranking it among Sevier County's largest employers. Or that the company's Tennessee operations enjoy considerable creative freedom, serving as a test market for the international company. Nonetheless, it's no illusion. Ripley's is a significant business partner in Tennessee.

Ripley's Aquarium general manager Steve File and Ryan DeSear, general manager of Ripley's Attractions in Sevier County (and a rising star within the global company), say that they enjoy a largely autonomous relationship with Ripley's corporate, located in Orlando, Fla. The company's top brass rely on creative teams steeped in the local culture to come up with innovative ideas that keep the brand ahead of the competition. The only caveat, File says, is that Ripley's whimsical feel remains consistent across all media and promotion.

Gatlinburg has also proven a good testing site for new Ripley's attractions. "We're finding [this] the epitome of a destination market and a huge draw for families," says Tim O'Brien, vice president of communications for Ripley's Entertainment.

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(cont. from on page 18)

Today, nearly 40 years after the company arrived in Sevier County, one can find a sampling of every Ripley's venue in this family fun hub, including the decades-old Believe It or Not! Museum, the Ripley's Motion Theater and newer installments such as Ripley's Haunted Adventure, two Ripley's Super Fun Zones, a newly opened Guinness World Record Museum and two mini-golf courses. In fact, Gatlinburg now boasts the largest concentration of Ripley's businesses in the world.

What works in Sevier County may not translate to other markets. But with a brand like Ripley's, there's no such thing as too odd. Back in 2000, some people might have thought it "odd" that Ripley's chose to locate a world-class, \$67 million aquarium on the parkway among vacation magnets like Ober Gatlinburg Ski Resort and Amusement Park. Ripley's second foray into the aquarium business—the first was in Myrtle Beach, S.C.—was quite a departure for the barons of the bizarre in Gatlinburg. But it worked. Today, the aquarium's popularity has made the attraction Gatlinburg's number one tourist draw—and among the top five in all the state.

"Most aquariums are well done but lean toward education. We want to bring fun and entertainment to the education component," says O'Brien, who is also a well-regarded amusement park expert.

Ripley's Aquarium of the Smokies, with its 1.4 million-gallon tanks holding 10,000 unique sea creatures, has hosted 10 million visitors in seven years, largely due to Ripley's aptitude in turning fish in a tank into a show. The aquarium boasts one of the world's



longest underwater tunnels with 11-foot sharks swimming overhead. Theatrics aside, both Ripley's Aquariums are accredited and employ marine professionals to care for the animals.

There are several aquariums within a day's drive of Ripley's, including Chattanooga's Tennessee Aquarium and the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta. Yet File does not see the others as a threat.

"We complement each other. We stimulate each others' business rather than compete," he says.

Another way in which Ripley's Aquarium remains competitive is through exhibit theme changes each year. The aquarium spends \$500,000 to build completely new displays that in recent years have focused on the Titanic, the Abyss and Mars. The 2008 exhibition will take visitors through the life cycle of sea animals.

The ability to adapt quickly, attract visitors and garner repeat business has long been a hallmark of the 85-year-old company. The same remains true for its Tennessee partners. **tn**

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