

# Vacation Bible School

## ...on Speed

BY DONNIE SNOW



## A developer looks to bring the Old and New Testaments to a mass audience via Rutherford County

Consider the dashboard Jesus—for some, a subtle reminder of an omnipresent savior; for others, a cheesy religious trinket.

Now imagine a \$200 million-dollar dashboard Jesus the size of Dollywood with the glamour of Disney situated down the street and you understand how the unofficially proposed Bible Park USA in Rutherford County sparked controversy the moment rumors began circulating last spring about a 200-acre Christian theme park being built in the middle of one of the fastest growing communities in the country.

Prematurely leaked news of the park created an audible uproar as citizens launched Web campaigns complaining its creation could have myriad unappetizing results, including devaluing property rates, drawing tax revenue from schools and damming up traffic in the decreasingly bucolic community of Blackman. Developers SafeHarbor Holding delayed submitting a proposal to the county planning commission hoping a redesign in the preplanning phase might quell the discord. (They expected to submit a formal proposal, admittedly months overdue, as this issue went to press.)

Described as an edutainment “story park,” Bible Park USA highlights include:

**The Bible Land Fly-Through** ▶ an indoor ride featuring “IMAX-like” surround imagery

**The Exodus Experience** ▶ an indoor “experience” with a parting of the Red Sea, flaming torch and booming, God-like voiceover

**Noah’s Ark** ▶ a recreation theatrical area with live animals

**Galilean Village** ▶ a live-acting village where visitors partake of “authentic Biblical foods” and experience otherwise every day life in Galilee 2000 years ago

The description makes it sound like the Jimmy Lee Farnsworth Christian theme park in the Chevy Chase flick *Fletch Lives*, but the résumés of Bible Park’s planners and designers are impressive. SafeHarbor, currently finishing the \$400-million Hard Rock Café Park in Myrtle Beach, S.C., hired former Disney/MGM designers BRC Imagination Arts to design Bible Park USA, along with HOK Sport Venue Event (Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore, London’s new Wembley Stadium, Nashville Arena and AutoZone Park in Memphis) and RPM Transportation Consultants (Nashville Arena, the

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Downtown Nashville Transportation Plan, Vanderbilt UMC Parking Study).

The Park's genesis began with Israeli-American Ronen Paldi, whose Oregon-based Ya'lla Tours has led pilgrimages through the Holy Land since 1993. What Paldi noticed, says partner Armon Bar-Tur, was that far more people wanted to take the tour than could. This led to the idea of bringing the facsimile Holy Land to Tennessee.

"Nashville is one of the largest centers for Christian religious conferences and concerts," British born Bar-Tur explains. The former Morgan Stanley portfolio manager says the region's central location, accessibility and growth

are the real reasons he chose Rutherford, about 35 miles southeast of the capitol. "It's one day's drive from most of the country."

SafeHarbor co-founder Bar-Tur plans to capitalize on the region's current robust tourist trade, but also expects to tap into a nascent religious entertainment tourism that's prompted the creation of destinations like Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Fla., and even the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Ky. Despite the Christian similarity, there are major differences between the destinations, namely size, profit and proselytizing.

Both Kentucky and Florida ventures are nonprofits funded by evangelistic ministries—the \$27 million Creation Museum by the Answers in Genesis ministry and the \$16 million Holy Land Experience by behemoth Trinity Broadcasting. Bible Park will espouse no denomination.

"Operationally," Bar-Tur says of his project's for-profit status, "it's where the incentives lie. The park in Orlando is a ministry pushing their message, [thus] limiting their audience and repeat visitors."

Courting private investment instead of ministry money, the Bible Park might manage to sidestep some polarizing positions that hindered destinations like the once-failing

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Holy Land Experience, which, before Trinity, was funded by Zion's Hope, whose explicit goal was to convert Jews to Christianity; as well as the Creation Museum—roundly criticized by scientists for promoting that early *Homo sapiens* mingled with dinosaurs.

Bar-Tur implies that for-profit investors also mean more seed capital.

“As a business, we have to provide the best experience possible, and you would not be able to create this level of experience [with their level of funding],” he says, explaining Bible Park’s two anchor attractions will cost about as much as the entire Holy Land Experience.

Despite the healthy private investment, which Bar-Tur says will cover a majority of the \$150 million to \$200 million budget, he expects to pay the remainder with bonds funded by tax-incremental financing. Though controversial, TIF money seems plausible to local government, although no one could say so specifically since SafeHarbor hadn’t submitted an official proposal.

“They have said it would take a few months, but since April we have seen no definitive plans,” Rutherford County Mayor Ernest Burgess says. “It sounds great, but we have no idea as to what will be a benefit since nothing is on the table yet. We’re left in the dark.”

State Sen. Jim Tracy says the new revenue stream



would be terrific, not that he’d have much say since recent legislation made such decisions completely local.

“The tourist dollars would be big,” he says, “if it ever comes to pass.”

Plainly stated, if it ever gets to the planning stage, many will think Bible Park USA a dump truck of fromage—but many won’t. And the kind of tourism and tax revenue it might generate would be a substantial boon to local business and community coffers. But is the tradeoff worth the payoff? **tn**

► *feedback: snow@businessstn.com*

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