



Wilderness hotel now open in Sevierville

Jeff Ferrell, Staff Writer
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SEVIERVILLE - The opening of the Wilderness at the Smokies Events Center Hotel on Thursday marked the latest step in the project that is reshaping the city.

The city paid \$65 million to build the Events Center, which opened last year. It is funding that and other projects through bonds it will repay with sales tax revenues from the Central Business Improvement District, which runs from the area around Smokies Stadium to downtown Sevierville.

The new hotel, which is attached to the Events Center, represents the latest private development in that area and one of the largest. The 234-room hotel includes a 40,000-square-foot water park for guests. It was designed with a style that closely matches that of the Events Center.

It's a new use for what once was farmland right across the Pigeon River from the county's main thoroughfare.

"Years ago when I saw Luther Ogle running cattle here ... I never dreamed we'd see something like this here," Sevierville Alderman Dale Carr said. "This is a dream come true."

It's also just the beginning of what Wilderness Resorts is planning for Sevierville. Work has already started on condominiums and a larger indoor/outdoor water park across from the Events Center on Old Knoxville Highway. Wilderness officials said they hope to have the indoor water park and the condos ready to open in December; the larger outdoor water park is slated to open in March.

Guests at any of their facilities will have access to all the water parks and will be able to park for free at the Events Center garage if spaces are available. The city built the garage and normally charges \$5 for parking; Wilderness acquired the right to parking for its guests when it purchased the land for the hotel.

Getting to this point took a lot of work on the part of Wilderness, city officials, local banks and Universe LLC, which developed the property and is responsible for the Bridgemont project. The first hotelier that had agreed to work on the project backed out early on, but that led the city to Wilderness, and led Wilderness to decide to make this its first facility outside its home base in the Dells of Wisconsin.

"I couldn't be happier with what this has evolved into," said Pete Helland, co-owner of Wilderness Resorts. The hotel had its soft opening last week and has already had a good response, he said; guests were playing in the water park Thursday as hotel staff offered tours for the grand opening.

Mountain National Bank and Sevier County Bank helped with the financing package for Wilderness.

"It was absolutely a huge team effort, and Sevier County Bank was happy to be a small part," said president R.B. Summitt.

Wilderness and the Events Center are not the end of the plans for the Gists Creek Road/Old Knoxville Highway intersection. Goodman Properties is planning a major retail development across from the Events Center on Gists Creek Road, and the city is already in the middle of adding 18 holes and new clubhouse at Eagle's Landing Golf Course.

"It's a great partnership," Helland said.

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