

Playland and Storyland not reopening as officials consider fundraising efforts

By Marc Benjamin



Overgrown weeds are noticeable around the dragon roller coaster inside the gate at Rotary Playland in Roeding Park Tuesday, March 3, 2015. Rotary Playland and Storyland, which are typically preparing to open at this time of year, could stay closed while the governing board seeks ways to raise money to improve and repair the park's rides and facilities. CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

Rotary Playland and Storyland, which typically prepare to open about now, could stay closed for the rest of 2015 as the board seeks ways to raise money to improve and repair the parks' attractions.

"We are remaining closed," said Daniel Leith, a Playland and Storyland board member. "We are evaluating and gathering our resources."

It could be the first time in 60 years that the parks have not been open, although Leith is hopeful that Storyland could open as early as April. Storyland, he said, needs new landscaping, minor maintenance and repairs.

Whether the parks remain under Rotary oversight is an open question. Fresno Chaffee Zoo Corp. officials confirm that they are in discussions about possibly acquiring the two parks, located just west of the zoo in Roeding Park. Board members also have spoken with Fresno city officials.

He said many Playland rides need repairs and there's no funding to pay for the work. New attractions also could be added.

“We want a safe environment and safe rides and after 60 years, some upgrades are needed,” Leith said. “Our thought is we are going to use 2015 for closure and do a capital campaign; we are not dead and we’re not planning on dying.”

Leith doesn’t have a firm number on repair costs, but he said it goes into the six figures.

Fundraising will include money and in-kind assistance, such as labor and materials, he said.

Playland requires much of the work, Leith said. The parks have three full-time employees year-round and about 20 seasonal workers when the parks are open.

Zoo corporation Chairman John Valentino said his board has been discussing some type of oversight plan for several weeks but hasn’t agreed on a plan. Talks with the zoo were occurring eight years ago when Playland and Storyland was enduring similar struggles. As support improved, both sides decided not to pursue a merger.

“At this point, all we can say is that the zoo board members feel it’s important to the community and we haven’t come to any consensus yet,” he said.

He said the zoo’s continuing rise in attendance — over 700,000 last year — offers large numbers for visitors to the neighboring parks. The two parks could create “synergies” with the zoo, he added.

However, Valentino said, the zoo cannot use Measure Z money to pay for renovations and repairs. Measure Z is the one-tenth-of-a-cent sales tax approved by Fresno County voters in 2004 and 2014 that pays for zoo improvements, staffing and programs.

“No Measure Z money can be spent on it and there can be no appearance of Measure Z money being spent on it,” he said. “The election was clear what Measure Z should be spent for.”

Fresno City Council President Oliver Baines said he has not been asked by Playland and Storyland officials about city financial assistance.

“I could possibly be supportive in helping them, but I don’t know what they need,” he said.

The city needs Playland and Storyland as a way to keep young people busy, Baines said.

“The more outlets for young people to have in our district is important,” he said.

In 2007, the city contributed \$100,000 that helped leverage other hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations for improvements to the park.

In the years since, about \$1.3 million in improvements were made with the addition of a splash park, the Tilt-a-Whirl, improvements to the train depot, several Storyland exhibits and landscaping. In 2011, Leith said attendance was 152,000 between the two parks. By 2014, those numbers had fallen to about 29,300 at both parks last year. Leith said the drop was caused by a combination of management problems and the age of park rides.

Playland and Storyland board members met with City Manager Bruce Rudd and apprised him of the parks’ situation.

Rudd said he met Monday with Playland and Storyland representatives and suggested they find a different business model, one that includes sponsorships of attractions with naming rights for ongoing funding.

He said the parks fell into a trap of keeping prices affordable while trying to maintain and repair attractions and the pricing didn’t allow the parks to keep up.

“They have been trying for so long to make the parks affordable and that’s in direct conflict with keeping the gates open,” Rudd said. “They need to put together a plan that is sustainable.”

He said the city doesn't have money available. The city has parks with decades of maintenance needs and needs new fire trucks.

Another problem is that Playland and Storyland officials don't know all their financial needs. Rudd said the train needs \$80,000 in repairs alone.

"What's concerning me is that they really don't know," Rudd said.

But, he said, Playland and Storyland should be an attractive opportunity for donors.

"It would be a good investment in the community," he said.

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