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Johnny Hanson / Houston Chronicle

Dining and entertainment empire-builder Tilman Fertitta is working toward an opening in late May for his new Galveston Island Pleasure Pier, which will jut out 1,000 feet over the surf at Seawall Boulevard and 25th Street.

Savvy native son looks to recapture Isle's past

Fertitta resurrecting iconic Pleasure Pier built in 1943

By David Kaplan

As a boy growing up in Galveston, Tilman Fertitta rode his bike up and down the Seawall. He went to fairs and carnivals when they hit town and had a season pass to Sea-Arama Marineworld. In high school he worked as a lifeguard at the Flagship Hotel and engaged in another beach town tradition — flirting with

out-of-town girls.

Now Fertitta, who built a fortune with a showman's flair, is resurrecting one of Galveston's most iconic tourist attractions — the Pleasure Pier. The \$60 million project will put a roller coaster and Ferris wheel over the Gulf of Mexico and is expected to encourage visitors to extend their trips to the island.

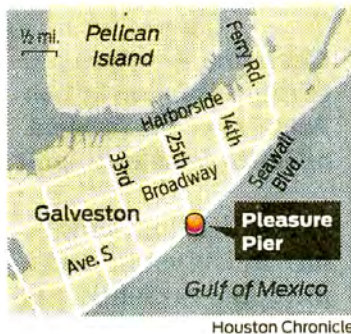
It's the latest waterfront

people flock to the water. You are always going to do a lot of business by the water."

Construction is under way. After its scheduled late-May opening, the Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier will jut out 1,000 feet over the surf at 25th Street, where the original Pleasure Pier stood from 1943 until it was destroyed by Hurricane Carla in 1961. More recently, it was the site of the Flagship, an over-the-water hotel built in 1965 that was demolished after 2008's Hurricane Ike.

The project will feature 16 rides, carnival games and souvenir shops. Food vendors will offer sausage-on-a-stick and other tourist favorites. And it

Pier continues on A8



Houston Chronicle

venture in Fertitta's dining and entertainment empire.

"Subliminally, Galveston has had a huge impact on me," Fertitta said in his first detailed public comments on the project. "I realized how

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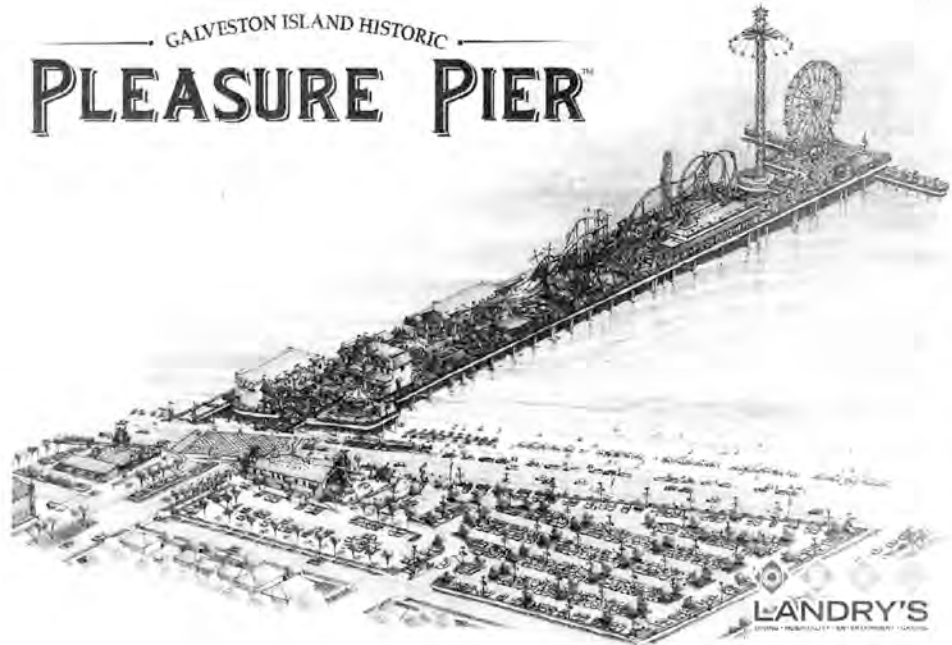
Mostly sunny, High 64, Low 45
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FROM THE COVER

Original destroyed by hurricane in '61



Landry's artist rendering

Mayor Joe Jaworski says the new Pleasure Pier entertainment venue, scheduled to open this summer in Galveston, should boost tourism on the Seawall and encourage visitors to extend their stays on the island.

will house the state's first Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., which Fertitta owns through his Houston-based Landry's.

Fertitta said he aims to make the Pleasure Pier a first-rate waterfront tourist spot on par with the Navy Pier in Chicago and Santa Monica Pier in Southern California.

Most of the rides will be unique to Southeast Texas, said Mark Kane, regional director of Landry's theme park division.

Historic precedents

The area around Seawall and 25th has historically been a tourist hub.

Before the original Pleasure Pier, there was another amusement venue across the boulevard: Electric Park, built in 1906, featured vaudeville shows, rides, trinkets, a restaurant and a man covered in tattoos. The rides lit up at night, said Dwayne Jones, executive director of the Galveston Historical Foundation.

The original Pleasure Pier featured rides, an arcade, an aquarium, concessions and fishing at the end of the pier, Jones said.

High-profile rides at the new Pleasure Pier will include the Iron Shark Steel Roller Coaster, a 100-foot-tall structure offering four 360-degree inversions and a back stretch that cantilevers over the water; the Texas Star Flyer, which will swing riders over the water 230 feet above the Gulf; and a 100-foot-tall Ferris wheel called Galaxy Wheel with programmable LED lights, Kane said.

Visitors will have to pay an admission fee, not yet set, to enter the amusement area. But diners at Bubba Gump won't have to pay to enter, said Jeff Cantwell, Landry's senior vice president of development.

Fertitta acquired the 33-unit Bubba Gump seafood chain soon after taking Landry's private in 2010. Many of the Gump restaurants are in tourist spots internationally, from Bali

The new Pleasure Pier

On the site of an iconic Galveston amusement park, construction for a new one is under way. In addition to a roller coaster and Ferris wheel that will extend over the surf, highlights are to include:

Family-oriented rides:

The Pirate's Plunge water ride for thrill-seekers and kiddie rides for the little ones.

Tourist staples: Food kiosks hawking many items, from hotdogs to funnel cake.

Souvenir shops:

Numerous retail operations, including an old-fashioned candy store and gift shop.

Carnival games: Among them, darts, Whac-A-Mole and ball and ring tosses.

Special events: An entertainment stage, giant TV and barbecue pit at the back of the pier for special events and private parties.

to Times Square.

Despite Galveston's history with severe tropical weather, the threat of another hurricane doesn't seem to bother Fertitta, known as a bold businessman who has accumulated a vast assortment of restaurants, hotels, gaming and entertainment venues that took in around \$2 billion last year.

"Doesn't even faze me," he said. "The best developments in the U.S. are on the waterfront. That's why you pay high insurance premiums, and you just don't worry about it."

Filling a void

The Pleasure Pier should boost tourism on the Seawall and encourage visitors to extend their stays in Galveston, Mayor Joe Jaworski said.

Fertitta said it will fit with existing attractions such as the beach, Moody Gardens, The Strand shopping district and Schlitterbahn water park.

John Gerner, managing director of Leisure Business Advisors, a theme park consulting firm in Richmond, Va., sees the

Pleasure Pier as poised to thrive.

The closing of Houston's regional theme park, Astroworld, created a void in the area for amusement parks, Gerner said. The Landry's-owned Kemah Boardwalk filled some of that void, he said, and so will the Pleasure Pier.

"Landry's is very well regarded in the leisure industry," he noted.

Schlitterbahn and Pleasure Pier will likely complement each other and help make Galveston more of a destination, Gerner suggested.

Fertitta owns the pier and several blocks on the other side of Seawall Boulevard that will be used for parking and retail. His Fish Tales restaurant is already open there.

Boardwalk memories

At his Houston headquarters a few days ago, Fertitta had on blue jeans and a button-down, untucked Lacoste shirt while munching on sticks of diet cheese. He recalled living in an apartment near the pier when he was very young, and working at the Flagship as a teenager.

"The Flagship was a magnet for out-of-town girls," he said, "so that's where I made sure I was."

Asked if the Pleasure Pier might draw business from the well-established Kemah Boardwalk, Fertitta said he expects people will go to the boardwalk on some days and other days they'll visit the pier.

What it's about, he said, is giving people more to do in Galveston County.

Last May, island residents voted to charge for parking on the Seawall to pay for landscaping, lighting, safety features, bathrooms and other improvements, Jaworski said.

Fertitta has not asked for any tax breaks or other incentives from the city, the mayor said.

Fertitta is heavily invested in Galveston. He owns Seawall Boulevard property between 50th and 57th Street and

operations on that stretch, including the San Luis Resort, Rainforest Cafe, Hilton and Holiday Inn hotels and Landry's Seafood House.

Jaworski said Fertitta's newest project will help Galveston as it continues to rebound from Hurricane Ike 3½ years ago. Last summer's tourist season was the city's second-best ever, based on hotel occupancy, he noted.

"The Flagship Hotel was a show of strength after Hurricane Carla," Jaworski said.

Likewise, he added, the new Pleasure Pier will attest to the city's post-Ike vitality.

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Galveston County Historical Museum

Near 25th Street and Seawall, Electric Park was once the epicenter for Galveston tourism. Built in 1906, it was supplanted by the first Pleasure Pier in 1943.



Rosenberg Library Galveston

A vintage postcard depicts the original Pleasure Pier, which drew throngs with rides, arcades, an aquarium, and a fishing pier. Now a new Pleasure Pier is going up at the same location.



Galveston County Historical Museum

The Electric Park, which occupied an area near the Seawall and 25th Street, featured vaudeville shows, rides, a restaurant and a man covered in tattoos.



Thomas B. Shea

The mild weather that drew joggers to the Seawall has been a boon to construction on the new Pleasure Pier, which replaces the Flagship Hotel in Galveston.