

Zoo

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shared their recollections of the park and their anticipation about its resurrection as a local treasure.

What generations of longtime fans will discover are four additional acres of animal exhibits, an education center, cool public art, a sit-down restaurant and new rides, including a children’s roller coaster and a whimsical carousel where you can ride a lemur or a hummingbird. A clever trail leads the curious on a cross-park trek from “here” to “there.” Even the entrance of the circa-1961 park has been flipped; visitors now enter from the east, through an expansive new plaza along Coyote Creek that is studded with animal sculptures.

The challenge for the renovation team was how to meld the reassuring old and the high-tech new while maintaining the park’s decidedly retro charm. After nearly 50 years, Happy Hollow had literally been loved to death by its fans, so it was long overdue for a rehab — as long as it was more of a careful reinterpretation than wholesale change.

All it took was one look at “the kids and their big eyes” at last week’s VIP preview party to know that the eight-year journey from planning to ribbon-cutting had met that goal, said Patrick Coleman, a park board member for more than 20 years. Much of the new construction took place while the park remained open; phase two, which required closing the park, began in July 2008.

“People say they miss some of the park’s old features, but then they look around at how well everything’s been done, how cool the artwork is and how it all comes together, and they realize we have retained the park’s essential quaintness,” Coleman said.

Most importantly, Coleman said, the new-old Happy Hollow is primed to fulfill the park’s main mission, which is education. “But not so you’re beat over the head with it,” he said, laughing. “This is fun learning, learning that takes place while play is happening.”

Not only is the new indoor-outdoor Learning Lodge an upgrade from the old double-wide education trailer, but it’s also the greenest structure there, built using hay-bale construction techniques and sporting a living roof. All of the park’s buildings meet or exceed Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design



KAREN T. BORCHERS/MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

The Danny the Dragon train ride at Happy Hollow Park & Zoo will be back this year, and it is now battery-operated instead of using diesel fuel.



Among the new rides is the Pacific Fruit Express, a roller coaster. There is also a new merry-go-round that features endangered and make-believe animals.

certification standards.

Heather Lerner, executive director of Happy Hollow Foundation, said the response to the park’s new look has been overwhelmingly positive.

“The feedback I’m getting is that we hit the mark in preserving what we could and simultaneously moving forward to serve a new generation of visitors,” she said. “We’ve retained the parklike feel, the variety of open-ended play experiences, vintage rides and puppet theater that make Happy Hollow a unique destination.”

“I think the whole change thing was less about will there still be a pirate ship than will the park retain its small, human scale,” Lerner said.

People have gotten very excited about some of the new features, she said, particularly the expanded animal exhibits and the veterinary building, where visitors can see animals being treated and even watch surgery.

That excitement is translating into crucial financial

support.

“It’s critical that we build an endowment so Happy Hollow will continue to thrive, regardless of the fluctuations in the economy,” Lerner said.

The public’s support is what fueled the multimillion-dollar makeover to the city-owned facility. In 2000, voters approved Proposition P, the Safe Neighborhood Parks and Recreation Bond Act, which would supply \$52 million of the overall price tag. But even in 2000, planners knew the bond money would not be enough to achieve the collective vision of Happy Hollow fans.

Helping to guide that process was the Seattle-based design-build firm Portico Group, which helped retain the focus on what 2- to 10-year-olds wanted in “their” park. Public meetings and focus groups were held, but much of the inspiration for the new park came through more informal interactions with the staff, parents and young visitors.

“We spent a lot of time

talking with kids and watching kids play,” said Bill Bost, president of Happy Hollow Foundation from 2004 to 2008. “We didn’t want to compete with Great America — that’s not our crowd. We wanted a fun, happy, creative place where the kids could just let their imaginations go crazy. We wanted the same feel but with a dash of the technology we’ve come up with since 1961.”

Aggressive fundraising made it possible to add the Pacific Fruit Express, a kid-size roller coaster, and a spectacular new merry-go-round, the Keep-Around Carousel, with its endangered and make-believe animals.

Still left to open this fall is the “Bent Bridge” over Coyote Creek that will link the entrance plaza with the new parking lot.

Eliminating the iconic Danny the Dragon was never on the table. The tram ride has been far and away its most popular attraction — even during that sad period in the 1980s when the mascot



HAPPY HOLLOW PARK & ZOO

1300 Senter Road, San Jose

Grand opening: Ribbon-cutting begins at 9:30 a.m. Saturday; gates open at 10 a.m.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily through May 28; the park stays open until 7 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays during the summer.

Admission: \$12, \$8 for seniors 70 and older, free to children younger than 2. Admission includes all rides, puppet theater and playgrounds. Parking is \$6 per car.

Details: 408-794-6400; www.hhpz.org

was held together with duct tape. Today, Danny sports an eye-popping paint job and even has his own set of green credentials: He’s powered by batteries.

What the park is calling the “Zoo on the Hill” is a new area that gives kids a chance to meet several varieties of lemurs and then mimic lemur play. A barn houses a donkey, miniature horses, a dwarf zebu and Navajo churro sheep. Take the bamboo-lined path down to the “Lower Zoo” to greet Sophia, the zoo’s 5-year-old jaguar, the popular meerkats and other animal favorites.

Back in 1961, when Happy Hollow opened, there was no zoo, but there were a few animals, including a harbor seal, capuchin monkeys, tortoises, ponies, ducks and pigs.

The new zoo has 128 animals.

Six are endangered species, including the jaguar, black and white ruffed lemurs, red ruffed lemur, ring-tailed lemur, scarlet macaw and fossa.

Despite all the high-tech new stuff, it’s the old-fashioned playground areas that resonate most with young visitors, Lerner said.

“A Brownie troop called and said they wanted to donate their cookie sale proceeds to Happy Hollow Foundation. A few of the girls came by and I gave them a mini-tour,” she said.

“When I saw how much they loved the new Lemur Woods play area and didn’t want to leave, I thought, ‘This is it. The first new memories of Happy Hollow are already starting to take hold.’”

HAPPY HOLLOW PARK & ZOO BY THE NUMBERS

San Jose’s venerable amusement park closed in July 2008 for a \$72 million top-to-bottom renovation that added extra space and many new attractions. Here’s a look at the before-and-after numbers:

Acreage

2008: 12.5

2010: 16

Food service

2008: 300 square feet

2010: 5,900 square feet

Rides

2008: 5

2010: 7

Education building

2008: 450 square feet

2010: 3,771 square feet

Play areas

2008: 2,700 square feet

2010: 12,800 square feet

Ticket windows

2008: 1

2010: 7

Retail building

2008: 150 square feet

2010: 2,353 square feet

Number of exhibits

2008: 17

2010: 28

Species total

2008: 47

2010: 48

Education programs

2008: 243

2010: 547 (projected)

Rides

1961: Danny the Dragon and the carousel, which later was converted from horses to sea creatures and renamed King Neptune’s Carousel.

2010: Seven rides including Danny the Dragon, Pacific Fruit Express Family Roller Coaster, Mini Putt Putt Cars, Kiddie Swing, Frog Hopper, Granny Bugs and the Keep-Around Carousel, featuring endangered species such as a custom black and white ruffed lemur.

Attractions

1961: The very popular maze, Shoe House, Magic Puppet Theater, Viking Ship and several play areas.

2010: New miners’ maze, upgraded puppet theater, Redwood Lookout play area, Leapin’ Lemur Woods play area, Crooked House Meadow, Dino Dig, Double H Ranch and expanded backyard habitat with bee-observation hive.

— Holly Hayes, Mercury News

Award

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also be put to a number of other uses, David said, such as analyzing MRI scans to detect diseases or allowing unmanned aerial vehicles to better process camera feeds for navigation.

Lynnelle, a math whiz who earned a perfect score on her SAT, delved into the highly complex realm of graphic and game theory. Her project, according to contest organizers, “seeks a way to find the winner of two-person combinatorial games, assuming perfect information.” Examples of such games are chess, Go and the mathematical strategy game Nim.

While difficult for a non-scientist to comprehend, the project could have implications in subjects ranging from artificial intelligence to economic theory, Lynnelle said.

Two other Bay Area students — Raman Nelakanti, 17, also of San Jose’s Lynbrook High, and Namrata Anand, 17, of San Jose’s Harker School — were among the 40 contest finalists, chosen among 300 semifinalists and 1,736 entries overall. The finalists all receive at least \$7,500, plus an Intel-powered laptop and the trip to Washington, all expenses paid. The contest winner was Erika DeBenedictis, 18, of Albuquerque, N.M., for developing a software navigation system to help spacecraft move more effortlessly through the solar system. It came with a \$100,000 prize.

The two top 10 finishers and four finalists represent the South Bay’s best performance ever in the Intel awards, though in 2006 a student from Harker named Yi Sun also won second place.

Interviewed in their hotel lobby hours before the awards ceremony (and before learning



INTEL

The top winners of the Intel Science Talent Search are Erika DeBenedictis, right, of Albuquerque, N.M., David Liu, of San Jose, and Akhil Mathew, of Madison, N.J.

how they did), David, Lynnelle and Raman reported similar formulas for their success: an innate curiosity about science, technology and math; parents (most steeped in technology themselves) who fostered that curiosity from an early age; and great mentors and teachers along the way.

“My parents are both engineers for high-tech companies, and they always encouraged me to explore what I was interested in,” David said. At a very young age, he said, “they bought me a book about programming.”

Lynnelle, who plans to earn a Ph.D. in math, remembered her grandmother teaching her math a few grades above her age “so I wouldn’t be bored.”

For Lynbrook High, having two finalists, including the runner-up, cements its status as a science factory. Teacher Amanda Alonzo, who started the school’s science fair program with a \$30,000 grant from Intel in 2003, said contestants are treated like celebrities by their peers.

David and Raman will get “a hero’s welcome” when they return to school, Alonzo said.

“They’re like rock stars.”

The students spent the past several days shuttling around Washington, seeing the sights and meeting important people, including National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins and Aneesh Chopra, the president’s chief technology officer.

“It’s been an awesome week, ridiculously fun” but somewhat exhausting, Lynnelle said before the awards ceremony.

After receiving word of her fourth-place finish, she said, “I’m not necessarily in my right mind. I’m shocked. I’m amazed.” Lynnelle has been accepted at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology, but she hasn’t settled on a college yet.

David was also stunned but elated by his second-place performance. “I was completely breath-taken. It’s indescribable,” he said.

David and Lynnelle both plan to use their award money to pay for college.

Contact Mike Zapler at 202-662-8921.

Health care

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reconciliation bill. Under the plan, the Senate bill would be “deemed passed” if and when the House adopts rules for debate on the reconciliation bill — or perhaps when the House passes that reconciliation bill.

The idea is to package the changes and the underlying bill together in a way that amounts to an amended bill in a single vote. Many House Democrats dislike some provisions of the Senate bill, including special treatment for a handful of states, like Medicaid money for Nebraska, and therefore want to avoid a direct vote on it.

Republicans paraded to the House floor Tuesday to denounce the maneuver as a parliamentary trick. Rep. Ted Poe, R-Texas, said Democrats were using “a sneaky snake oil gimmick” to pass their bill. “Let’s have an up-or-down vote on this bill and not hide behind some procedural mumbo jumbo,” Poe said.

At the White House on Tuesday, the debate over procedural tactics proved uncomfortable for President Barack Obama’s press secretary, Robert Gibbs. He sidestepped numerous questions about whether Obama wanted an explicit, separate vote on the Senate bill and deferred to Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco. “The final decision is the speaker’s,” Gibbs said.

Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., the assistant to the speaker, said Republicans were trying to deceive the public about the legislation that Democrats were working on. “They want to send a signal to the American people that the product that is going to come out of the

House is the Senate bill, but the fact of the matter is we are amending the Senate bill,” Van Hollen said. “We are going to get rid of the Nebraska deal. We are going to get rid of other provisions in the Senate bill that shouldn’t have been there.”

The House Democratic leader, Rep. Steny Hoyer, also defended the maneuver Tuesday. “It is consistent with the rules,” Hoyer said. “It is consistent with former practice.”

An analysis of the procedural device prepared by Pelosi’s office says “Some opponents of reform are objecting to the process in an attempt to kill the bill.”

However, some Democrats who support the bill

have expressed reservations about the maneuver and said that House leaders might rethink their plans if the chorus of criticism continued to grow.

House Democratic leaders said they still expected the full House to vote on health care by this weekend, even though they are still tinkering with the text of the legislation and do not have a final cost estimate from the Congressional Budget Office.

Democrats are trying to hold the cost of the new insurance coverage provisions in the bill to roughly \$950 billion over 10 years, in keeping with a limit suggested by the president.

Also, under budget reconciliation rules, they must meet goals for reducing future deficits.

To make the numbers come out right, Democrats said, they are considering bigger cuts in payments to private Medicare Advantage

plans, which cover about one-fourth of the 45 million Medicare beneficiaries.

And they may ask pharmaceutical companies to pony up more money to help close a gap in Medicare coverage of prescription drugs.

Pelosi said she had “a massive whip operation” trying to round up votes for the bill.

The study released this week showed that California’s uninsured population jumped to 8.2 million in 2009, up from 6.4 million in 2007, marking the highest number over the past decade, investigators from UCLA’s Center for Health Policy Research said.

Californians who were uninsured for part or all of 2009 accounted for 24.3 percent of the state’s population under age 65 — a dramatic increase from 2007 driven largely by people who lost employer-sponsored health insurance, particularly over the last year.

The UCLA study did not raise an eyebrow Tuesday in Patricia Currin’s Santa Clara home, where the family has been through the health care wringer. Her husband was laid off last year, and although he has a new job, he remains uninsured.

Her two young kids are covered under the state’s Healthy Families low cost insurance plan. But Currin’s own deductible is so high that basically every non-urgent doctor’s visit is unaffordable.

That means the 32-year-old tries to ignore her odd aches and pains.

The Los Angeles Times and Mercury News Staff Writer Sean Webby contributed to this report.