

## More Than Memories

*Rodeos, flea markets & more bring people back to Santa's Village site*

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EAST DUNDEE - The rides are running again at **Santa's Village**. Maybe not the Snowball, the Himalaya or the carousel with Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer bobbing among the horses. But earlier this month there was a Ferris wheel, some teacups and the Screamer in the parking lot.

And teams are playing in the Polar Dome, now the United Sports Arena. It's home to the Lake County (Indiana) Tsunami - a semi-pro soccer, rather than hockey team - and to a new restaurant.

"One by one, we're kind of reopening things," said Patrick O'Connor of property owner Sterling Bay Companies LLC. Since the amusement park shut down in 2006, the downturn in the real estate market has "mothballed" development on the 38-acre property at Routes 25 and 72 in East Dundee, according to O'Connor.

But, he said, "The park hasn't seen much action in the past few years, and it seemed like as good a time as any to develop some interest on the site."

That development started last summer with the first **Santa's Village** Flea Market, said Rene Hernandez, event director for the property. That weekly flea market now brings a few thousand visitors through the former **Santa's Village** parking lot each weekend, browsing everything from food and jewelry vendors to farm stands, he said. Among them Saturday, George Karris of Pingree Grove has vague memories of riding the rides at **Santa's Village**, coming from Chicago to the amusement park with his family years ago.

"This is what it's come down to - **Santa's Village** to a flea market," Karris said.

His mother, Katherine, added, "So? People enjoy it."

It's true, Karris admitted. He'd just bought his mother a watch at the **Santa's Village** Flea Market. And he said he was enjoying himself: "In the recession, you get some bargains, you get some food, you meet people."

That lot also has seen carnivals and car shows. And the former Polar Dome ice arena has brought in not only soccer teams but also an "Americanized version of a rodeo" named El Gallo de Oro, Hernandez said. Already, there have been three indoor rodeos and three outdoor ones on the property, and those are planned to continue once or twice a month, he added.

"The Polar Dome has been cleaned out totally. It doesn't look anything like it used to," he said. "There's nothing on the inside to remind you of what it used to be."

Hernandez added, "We all have those memories."

He'd love to see the antique-style cars that used to run around the amusement park up and running again - perhaps in the winter, to loop through the property past holiday light displays - a seasonal event like the Haunted Hike held there last fall.

He's heard other ideas for the property, such as paintball, Go Karts and private events in the picnic grove area. And Sterling Bay is open to anything, he added.

"It's a true activity property right now," said Charles Black of Impact Business Solutions Inc., which helps plan events on the property. "The area is really starving for entertainment, and we're doing everything we can to fill that need." More than memories

Sterling Bay had bought the **Santa's Village** property in 2005 and reportedly was negotiating with an amusement park operator to keep the park open up until its rides were auctioned off in October 2006.

The park had made East Dundee a destination for 46 years. That corridor at Routes 25 and 72, now called Dundee Crossings, always has been the major retail and business center for the village, according to Village Administrator Frank Koehler.

"Before there was Randall Road, before there was Route 59, there was Route 25," Koehler said.

**Santa's Village**, car dealerships, Walmart and Dominick's lined Route 25. Route 72 dead-ended into Route 31. And, the village manager remembered, "East Dundee was the place to be."

Since then, the park, the Dominick's and several dealerships have closed, and Walmart has announced plans to relocate to neighboring West Dundee. But the village has created incentives, including tax increment financing and business development districts, to encourage development at Dundee Crossings, and more than 60,000 vehicles a day still travel through the area, he said.

That's what interested Sterling Bay in the property, now listed for sale by Marcus and Millichap Real Estate Investment Services, O'Connor said. The company liked the location: a busy thoroughfare, not far from the Interstate 90 interchange on Route 72 to the east, "in the path of development," he said.

After the park closed, the village had discussed ideas for townhomes, a convention center, an indoor water park and a niche shopping center at a workshop with the company. Now, O'Connor confirmed, "We are in the process of working on a number of things."

Meantime, Koehler said, anything that brings people to Dundee Crossings is a good thing. Development in the area means employment opportunities for residents and sales tax revenue for the village.

And all those things mean the **Santa's Village** property - and the village - won't just become another story, another thing of memory.

"Everybody I talk to, everybody has a story of when they were a kid and they used to work there, they were a teen and they used to work there, or they were parents and they took their kids there," Black said.

"Everybody has a story all the way through their life where they were involved with **Santa's Village**."