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Today's Weather

Previous Story Next Story

Our Top Links

What We Do

# Vail Lake RV park to reopen after 10 years of vandalism

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VAIL LAKE ---- After being closed and subjected to the whims of vandals for a decade, the old Butterfield Country RV Park at Vail Lake east of Temecula will reopen over the long holiday weekend.

"It was very, very popular with a couple generations of kids that grew up here," said Temecula developer Bill Johnson, who owns the property he is renaming Vail Lake Resort. The park originally opened in 1968 before closing in 1989 when the property went into foreclosure.

Now, said Johnson, residents of Southwest County will be able to enjoy once again the quiet getaway built beneath hundreds of large coast live-oak trees overlooking the private lake about 10 miles east of Temecula on Highway 79 South.

Johnson, who has played a leading role in the development of the Temecula Valley over the past two decades, bought 9,000 acres at the site ---- including the lake itself, the marina, the recreational-vehicle park and loads of open space around it ---- from Kemper Life Insurance in January 1998.

One of the first things he set out to take care of after completing the purchase was the dilapidated condition of the 500-acre recreational-vehicle park with its 500 spaces and village plaza shops.

"This has been our little labor of love for the past year and a half," Johnson said. "It was completely vandalized. They took every window, every door. It was a total shambles."

But after spending $2.5 million to renovate the village plaza buildings, install new wells and pumps, replace the irrigation system, revamp the landscaping, put in new wiring and lights and clean out sewer lines, Johnson said last week, the park is almost ready to reopen.

"In a few days we'll be serving sarsaparilla here," he said, while showing the century-old adobe structure that functioned as a bunkhouse for Vail Ranch wranglers in an era long past. It is connected to a newer, modern structure furnished with a bar.

The other day, Johnson and his wife, Tish, were trying to figure out what to name the place that soon will be serving refreshments to resort visitors. She suggested "The Bunkhouse," but that didn't sit well with her husband after he gave it some thought.

"I don't know," Johnson told his wife. "Bunkhouse sounds to me like smelly socks. Let's name it the Vintners Bar."

A Vintners Bar, Wine Country Store & Deli and the Chardonnay Events Center ---- all situated in a circle around a plaza for eating and enjoying outdoor concerts ---- are set to open over the Fourth of July weekend, along with 180 refurbished recreational-vehicle spaces, Johnson said.

A steakhouse, miniature golf course, water slide, fishing pond and three swimming pools are scheduled to reopen later this summer, he said. The rest of the 500 spaces should be ready by the end of the year.

Along with the reopening this weekend, Johnson said, will come the opportunity to rent thoroughbreds from a stable run by 44-year-old Dave Hart. Hart grew up on a ranch that is now part of Johnson's sprawling Vail Lake landholding and remembers when the old RV park was thriving.

"It was a booming place back then," he said.

Hart moved to Oregon for several years and now he is back, living and working at the new Vail Lake Resort equestrian center.

There are dozens of miles of trails around the lake, and the Cleveland National Forest is nearby.

"They can ride horses up into the Agua Tibia Wilderness," Johnson said. "They can ride horses all the way up to Mount Palomar if they want to."

While resort visitors will be able to enjoy the view of the 900-acre lake, and hike or ride on horseback down to it, they will not be able to launch a boat on the lake or cast a line from a fishing pole into it because it is private.

Johnson is embroiled in a legal battle with the company, Sundance International, that has a contract to manage the lake and marina area for his Vail Lake Rancho California company. A hearing is scheduled in a Riverside courtroom next Thursday to consider appointing a receiver to manage the properties because Johnson claims that Sundance has allowed the facilities to deteriorate. Sundance maintains it has done a good job taking care of the grounds.

There are three Johnson companies in all connected to his vast 28-square-mile property that is as large as the city of Temecula.

His Vail Lake Village and Resort company is the one that owns the old recreational-vehicle park he is refurbishing. His Vail Lake USA company owns the remaining 7,000 acres. He is making big plans for that property for the future.

Johnson said he hopes one day to build three 18-hole golf courses, develop a residential community, lure a high-technology company and open a winery surrounded by as many as 1,000 acres of grapevines.

"I want to position this as a Wine Country and golf course resort so it will attract people from all over the world," he said. "Our goal will be to extend the Wine Country out Highway 79 South."

Johnson even plans to build a house of his own one day on the place that he loves to talk about. He gushes about the natural springs, the lake's beauty, the cool breezes that sweep down from the pine-carpeted mountains to the south and the history of the place that once was a stop on a stagecoach route.

The lake itself has a lot of history behind it. It was not some big project tackled by the federal government or a California water agency. On the contrary, rancher Mahlon Vail built the dam on Temecula Creek that created the lake in the 1940s to irrigate the fields that fattened cattle on the once-sprawling Vail Ranch.

The land of dripping springs and shady oak trees is almost as quiet now as it was then.

"I am attracted to the tranquillity of this place," Johnson said. "It's got a great vibe. There is a great consciousness to this place. You can feel it."

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