

The Miami Herald

Wednesday, February 1, 2012

HOLLYWOOD

Margaritaville not open yet, but ready to party

It's never too early to party in Margaritaville — even if its years from opening.

CTEPROFF@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Margaritaville Beach Resort may not be open yet, but it's already hosting a party.

On Thursday, nearly 500 travel gurus will get down Margaritaville-style as part of the Florida Huddle, a signature travel symposium, which draws travel experts from places including Canada, Scandinavia and Germany.

"It's sort of our coming out party," said Lon Tabatchnick, the developer of the beach-themed resort.

And though there will be no building or hammocks by the pool, there will be a giant tent, island-themed décor and probably a few shakers of salt.



"What better way is there to get people excited about the future?" he said. Margaritaville isn't even open yet, and it's already booked its first big event. Thursday night, the site of the future Margaritaville will be hosting The Huddle, a conference for travel planners, in order to get Hollywood on the map as a premiere destination.

And the future, for Margaritaville — which is tied to singer Jimmy Buffett — is looking bright, said Tabatchnick, during a presentation to the Hollywood City Commission Wednesday.

"We are getting there," he said. "We are going through the process."

Though there have been some delays — including pushing back the opening from March 2014 to August 2014 — Tabatchnick said within 60 to 90 days he should have the building permits, community development district approval for the public garage and most of the financing secured.

Tabatchnick introduced the commission to WCH Synergy Investment, the group working with Margaritaville to secure 150 foreign investors, mainly from China.

The idea is that each investor loans \$500,000 to developers in exchange for a green card to live in the United States, a program that is run by the U.S. Department of Immigration.

Tabatchnick said investors are coming on board and plans are moving along.

A virtual tour took the commission into a beach paradise, with a swinging hammock at sunset, colorful beach umbrellas casting shade over large chairs and a seemingly endless pool.

The \$131 million project will house 349 rooms, seven restaurants and bars and several retail shops. Several of the components, including a surf flow-rider used to simulate surfing, will be open to the public.

Mayor Peter Bober said Wednesday he liked what he saw — and was looking forward to seeing the final product.

“I am confident they will get it done,” Bober said. “They have done everything they said they were going to do.”

Commissioner Fran Russo said she couldn’t wait until the ground breaking — especially if Buffett would make an appearance.

“He’ll be there,” said Tabatchnick, adding the famous singer would probably make a few unannounced appearances. “There will be traffic control problems if we announce he is going to be there.”

For months, the anticipation of Margaritaville has spurred a frenzy of improvements up and down A1A and the Broadwalk. Restaurants and hotels have been securing grants from the Community Redevelopment Agency’s improvement program to shore up storefronts.

The CRA has also fed millions to revamping the Broadwalk, as way to get ready for Margaritaville.

“This is going to be a complete game-changer for Hollywood,” said Tabatchnick.

Alfredo Gonzalez, the vice president of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau agreed, adding that having a new resort with such a widely recognized name is good for South Florida in general.

Gonzalez said when planning the Florida Huddle — which is held in different cities across Florida yearly — they were looking for something on the beach and something that would appeal to travel buyers. The symposium, being held yearly in different locations, is a one-stop shop for Florida travel destinations.

“We needed something that people could get excited about,” he said. “This will keep people on edge waiting for it to open.”