

Cool Reception for Bible Park in Bible Belt

Plan for Religion-Themed Attraction Draws Fire in Tennessee

By THEO EMERY

MURFREESBORO, Tenn., June 6 — Behind Blackman United Methodist Church, on a low hillock overlooking a freshly mown meadow, wooden benches face a sturdy altar table and a plywood lectern. A plain cross, slightly bowed by weather, towers over the outdoor chapel.

The congregation sometimes assembles here for open-air services, said the pastor, Bryan Brooks, with the trees and pastures across Route 840 for a backdrop. But that view may change, because the land beyond the road has been proposed as the site for a theme park called Bible Park USA on over 100 acres.

The proposal has ignited fierce opposition to the project. The park, which would be in Rutherford County in an area known as Blackman, would be about 35 miles southeast of Nashville.

The focus of the park, and the fact that many in this booming Bible Belt community have not embraced the proposal, sets the dispute apart from other development clashes, intertwining deeply held religious beliefs with the humdrum of zoning, taxes and traffic.

The project has united its opponents, whose fledgling campaign to derail it erupted long before the developers intended their proposal to become public.

"Would I rather look at the theme park or would I rather look at the farmland and the forest here?" Mr. Brooks said, looking out at the proposed site. "I would pick the latter."

Armon Bar-Tur, managing director of SafeHarbor Holding, a New York company that is developing Bi-

Not in our backyards, say residents of a fast-growing corner of the South.

ble Park USA, said the project was revealed to officials months before it was ready. Misperceptions and "silly rumors" have resulted, he said.

"This is a very serious undertaking," Mr. Bar-Tur said. "This is not some hokey park that we're talking about."

The location, a former farm with rolling pastures and groves of trees, sits amid rapid residential growth. Hundreds of homes have replaced area farms, dump trucks trundle steadily along nearby Burnt Knob Road, and a new highway interchange is nearing completion a short distance away.

The park, described in promotional material as "edutainment," would cost \$150 million to \$200 million. With a Galilean village as its centerpiece, one side of the park would present Old Testament stories like the Exodus; the other side would have New Testament stories like Jesus' birth and crucifixion. The only displays in writing would be excerpts from Scripture, and parts of the park would be reserved for Bible study.

Over the past year and a half, the developers explored many locations, but settled on Rutherford County, Mr. Bar-Tur said. The site here is ideal because it lies near an Interstate and a state highway, close to Nashville and its airport, and within a day's drive of much of the country's population.

Another factor was its Bible Belt



In Murfreesboro, Tenn., Jason Fox plants a sign opposing a proposed Bible theme park. Bryan Brooks, right, pastor of Blackman United Methodist Church, is also an opponent.

location. But Mr. Bar-Tur said that was not the site's chief attraction, and that the park would not proselytize. Rather it would simply present biblical scenes without evangelizing; no roller coaster or Ferris wheel, just a "calm, solemn park," where visitors of any faith or denomination would feel welcome. "This is a very different sort of park," he said.

Ronen Paldi, the chief executive officer of the proposed park who is also a tour operator who organizes pilgrimages to the Holy Land, said he wanted Americans who were afraid to travel to the Middle East, or could not afford it, to be able to visualize scenes from the Bible. Comparing the park to Disneyland, he said it would be a tremendous benefit to the area.

"The park will become a national destination for Americans," Mr. Paldi said.

After the plan became public, the developers went on the offensive, meeting with residents and members of the clergy and hiring a public relations firm.

Opponents in Blackman have also gone into high gear.

Joe Dassaro, who lives about a mile and a half away, started an opposition Web site. Petitions were distributed at a community meeting last week, and lawn signs were printed on Thursday.

"He mistook Southern hospitality for acquiescence," Mr. Dassaro said of Mr. Bar-Tur.

Some opponents argue that any theme park would be the wrong kind of growth for the area. Some say proposed tax incentives, which would be permitted under legislation passed in the General Assembly this week, should not be extended to the developers. Some say the park will cheapen the Bible and their religion. Many hold all three views.

It is difficult to gauge the extent of the opposition, but residents agree that the park has more detractors than supporters. One state lawmaker from Murfreesboro said she had received hundreds of calls and e-mail messages, "99 percent" of them against the park.

In contrast, another developer's recently announced plans for an "Ole South" theme park in two nearby counties has not stirred opposition, according to state lawmakers from that area.

The only comparable Bible-themed destination in the United States is the 15-acre Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Fla., said Reagan Hillier, president of the Faith Based

Amusement Association, though he said dozens of traditional theme parks incorporated faith-based themes.

Paula Agee, who lives across the highway from the site of the proposed park, said she supported the idea but was in the minority. She said it would bring better roads and services, and that she preferred it over new homes.

"I'm not really that worried about

it," she said. "I think it would actually end up being a good thing for the residents of Blackman."

Neighboring relations remain cordial, with ire reserved for the developers. Some residents say the project has been thrust upon them with the assumption that it would be welcome because of its religious theme, a perception that many here are eager to dispel.

"A lot of people think this is a big

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boy who's come in to a small town, and he's pulling the wool over our eyes and feeding us a line, and hopes the Tennessee hillbilly people don't catch on," said Melissa Batey, who lives on a nearby farm that has been in her husband's family for 200 years.

Mr. Bar-Tur said nothing had been hidden.

"We have done every single thing possible to stay as above-board as

possible," he said.

Susan Hunnicutt, a Blackman resident, disagreed.

Ms. Hunnicutt, who described herself as having a "very conservative religious background," said that she worried about property values and clogged roads, and that she was offended that the Bible would be the central theme.

"We are going to fight tooth and nail," she said.