

November 30, 2008

Delaware North responding to residents' feedback

By Lance Wellwood

Delaware North has made the structures more historically accurate and has repaired them, protecting them for the enjoyment and education of future generations.

The future of Plaza del Pasado in Old Town San Diego State Historic Park is rooted in San Diego's past, specifically the era from 1821 to 1872, when it transitioned from Mexican pueblo to the region's first European settlement.

Delaware North Companies took on this mission in 2004 after winning the state's contract bidding against five other companies. This interpretive agenda was not driven by Delaware North. It was originally outlined by state park officials in the park's general plan drafted in 1977.

Since becoming the operator of the park's three restaurants – Casa de Reyes, the Jolly Boy Saloon and Restaurant, and the Cosmopolitan Hotel and Restaurant – as well as its shopping plaza, Delaware North has invested \$6 million of the \$12 million in private capital that it has committed to investing in historic restorations, repairs and equipment.



Not only did Delaware North pledge to invest \$12 million in improvements, which was \$8 million more than the state's required minimum, but it is paying the state \$2 million annually in base rent – a figure that will rise with the consumer price index – or a percentage of its gross income, whichever is greater.

Delaware North has made the structures more historically accurate but, more important for San Diegans, has also repaired them, protecting them for the enjoyment and education of future generations.

Delaware North has set aside an additional \$6 million to complete upgrades to the kitchen at Casa de Reyes and for the biggest remaining restoration project, the Cosmopolitan Hotel and Restaurant. The effort will recreate San Diego's oldest hotel building as it was in 1872, with a saloon bar, a rear patio open to a newly redesigned Seeley Stables and an exterior bar in the courtyard.

Stagecoach rides will take patrons from the Cosmopolitan through Old Town. And, most exciting, planning is under way to return a portion of the building to use as a working hotel, renting out second-story guest rooms and resuming a 136-year-old San Diego tradition.

Delaware North is responding to the feedback of San Diego County residents by introducing more local merchants and artisans in the Plaza shops. Locally owned boutiques, shops and art studios have opened in recent months – selling Temecula olive oils, Ramona wines, family made soaps, baked goods and spectacular artwork.

Delaware North has also embraced all of the state's requirements, from instituting educational programs for schoolchildren to placing a full-time interpretive manager on staff who developed the interpretive program now delivered through the state park. For our neighboring merchants, we have been diligently working to attract tourist traffic, despite the restaurant closures during the needed restorations.

Plaza del Pasado provides employment to 250 area residents, including several mariachi bands. For the record, it is still a great destination for margaritas, but now you can also enjoy absinthe in a historic saloon setting as well.

Delaware North will continue to work with local shop and restaurant owners while investing in the park's infrastructure to bring San Diegans not only an enjoyable place to visit, but a reminder of how far this city has come and a living testament to the grit and determination of its ancestors who made it possible.

Wellwood is general manager of Plaza del Pasado.
