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# Legos Build Future of Gardens

## Merlin CEO, Crist visit Winter Haven for official unveiling of Legoland details.

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THE LEDGER

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WINTER HAVEN | A front-loading tractor was positioned Thursday morning outside the Magnolia Mansion at Cypress Gardens. It wasn't there to move any dirt.

Instead, a driver tilted down the scoop and dumped 100,000 Lego bricks onto a stage. That was a mere down payment, with 39.9 million more to follow when Legoland Florida opens by the end of next year.

Confirming what he called "Florida's worst-kept secret," Merlin Entertainments Group CEO Nick Varney related his vision of a theme park he said will rank among the top five in the world and establish Winter Haven as a tourist destination known around the globe.

Despite gray skies and gusting winds, the mood was exuberant at Thursday's news conference, attended by a large contingent of media members as well as elected officials and high-ranking figures in Polk County government. Florida Gov. Charlie Crist joined Varney on the platform and gushed about the prospect of a world-class attraction expected to create 1,000 full-time jobs.

"It is a great day for Florida - a great day," Crist said. Addressing Varney, he added, "Welcome to Florida, and thank you so much for being here."

Merlin is based in Poole, England.

Crist and Varney unveiled a model of a Florida panther cub made from 6,200 Lego bricks. Merlin's Lego artists also created a basketball-sized model of an orange and a representation of the Polk County shield.



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Nick Varney, Chief Executive of Merlin Entertainments, (left) presents a Polk County emblem made of Legos to Polk County Commission chairman Bob Engilsh during a press conference announcing Legoland Florida will be built on the former site of Cypress Gardens in Winter Haven, FL on Thursday January 21, 2010.

## all about location

Varney said Merlin officials considered other locations closer to Orlando for its first Florida property. But he said Cypress Gardens, with its combination of natural beauty and existing structures, perfectly fit the company's plans. He said it would have taken at least twice as long to develop a new park in the Orlando area.

Varney, father of four, said, "The hairs on the back of my neck stood up," when he first visited Cypress Gardens in November 2008.

"It was love at first sight," Varney said. "And that was exactly what all of my colleagues felt as well."

Thursday's festivities were the culmination of more than a year of negotiations among Merlin, former owners Brian Philpot and Rob Harper and Polk County tourism officials. Merlin, the world's second-largest operator of tourist attractions behind Walt Disney Co., completed its purchase of the park last week. Documents filed with the Polk County Property Appraiser's Office indicate a price of \$22.3 million.

Varney said construction work at the former Cypress Gardens Adventure Park will begin almost immediately. He wouldn't say how much Merlin plans to spend developing the park, but in his address Crist suggested the company plans "hundreds of millions of dollars" of investment.

Though Varney declined to make predictions about potential attendance, he said the other Legoland parks draw 1.5 million to 2 million visitors a year. He said admission prices will be less than what Disney World charges, though he wouldn't be more specific.

## WHAT STAYS, WHAT GOES?

Varney pledged to maintain some traditional elements of Cypress Gardens, one of Florida's oldest existing theme parks. He said the decades-old botanical gardens will be preserved, possibly with the name Cypress Gardens.

"The botanical gardens will always be one of the compelling reasons why people should come here," Varney said. "I can assure any of you who were concerned that the gardens of Cypress Gardens are very, very safe in our hands."

As part of a deal brokered by state and local officials and the Trust for Public Land in 2004, a conservation easement protects the entire 152 acres of the park. The easement forbids residential development but will not inhibit Merlin's plans, said Mark Jackson, executive director of Central Florida Tourism and Sports Marketing.

Polk County owns the core 30 acres, including the botanical gardens, and will lease them to Merlin as it did to the previous owners, Jackson said.

Varney said he expects to continue the water-ski shows on Lake Eloise "with a Lego twist." He said Legoland Florida will probably keep some of Cypress Gardens' rides, including one roller coaster.

He said Merlin plans to retain the adjacent Splash Island Water Park as a separate attraction.

A Merlin spokeswoman said the company hasn't yet decided what to do for people who held annual passes to Cypress Gardens when it closed.

Varney praised Philpot and Harper for maintaining the park throughout the lengthy negotiations, saying they had "the patience of saints." Philpot and Harper, through their Mulberry-based company Land South Holdings, acquired Cypress Gardens for \$16.8 million at a bankruptcy auction in 2007.

After struggling to break even financially, the owners abruptly closed the park in September.

## **DEAL LONG TIME IN THE WORKS**

Philpot said he and Harper first met with Merlin representatives in the late summer or early fall of 2008. He said the negotiations took so long because Merlin, as a major corporation, had to thoroughly research all aspects of the possible purchase.

There were several other potential buyers, Philpot said, but none of the others had a conception for the site that matched their own.

While the reported sale price is \$5.5 million more than the local company paid, Philpot wouldn't say how much money he and Harper invested in the property or whether they made a profit.

Asked whether he was relieved the deal is final, Philpot said, "You can use the word relieved, but we're just excited. We're going to end up with the second-largest theme park operator in the world making their entry into Florida and they're making it in Polk County. They didn't choose to go to Orlando; they didn't choose to go to Tampa. It's exciting to be part of it."

Varney said Legoland Florida will be larger than any of the company's four existing Legoland parks - one in California and three in Europe. He said the park will eventually become Legoland Florida Resort and will contain at least one hotel.

Legoland Florida will follow the same model with a central "Miniland" exhibiting elaborate Lego models depicting scenes from the area. He said the company's designers are already at work designing Lego constructions for the Winter Haven attraction.

The Legoland parks are geared toward children 2 to 12 years old - and, of course, their parents. Varney, calling Lego one of the world's best-known brands, said the parks are unique among tourist attractions in presenting children the opportunity for "playful learning," as opposed to passive entertainment at other theme parks.

Winter Haven City Commissioner Nathaniel Birdsong Jr. summed up the local reaction:

"People are elated," he said. "When you talk about 1,000 jobs and potentially more, that has a tremendous economic impact on this area."

State Sen. J.D. Alexander, a Polk County native, said the impact goes beyond even the

expected economic boost.

"I think it's a fabulous day for Polk County," Alexander said. "It's hard to describe to people how important this sort of institution is to our sense of self and our community. Not only does it create a lot of jobs, which we desperately need now, but it also creates a sense of place and a sense of self for the broader community."

County Commissioner Bob English offered a more personal perspective.

"I have an 11-year-old daughter, and she can't wait till this opens," English said.

Alexander acknowledged that Legoland Florida will place strain on Winter Haven's traffic system. He said he will continue to push for the expansion of U.S. 27 to six lanes south from Interstate 4.

Varney, for his part, seemed unconcerned about Legoland Florida's location, about an hour's drive from the Orlando tourist corridor and some 22 miles from Interstate 4. He cited the success of Legoland California, located about 35 miles north of San Diego.

Varney said the California attraction has seen a rise in visitors in each of the past four years. It has also been voted the world's best attraction for children the past six years by Amusement Today, a theme park trade publication.

Several seats at Thursday's ceremony were occupied by children wearing navy blue Legoland polo shirts. The youngsters, all residents at Florida Baptist Children's Homes in Lakeland, were probably less impressed by the speeches than by the tables covered in Lego blocks at their disposal before the news conference.

One of the kids, a 13-year-old girl named Marishel, built an airplane. She said it reflected the evacuation by air of orphans from Haiti to a Florida Baptist Children's Homes facility in Leesburg.

Marishel said she hopes to return when Legoland Florida opens next year.

"I think I'm going to really like it," she said. "I can't wait till it opens. I think it's going to be real cool."

Merlin Entertainments Group is wagering that a few other children will agree.

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