

Black Bart and the gang have moral support, need financial support

Bufalo News story by [Samantha Christmann](#), Jul 9, 2020

They've got the drive, the experience and the passion. Now all they need is \$5 million.

Empire Adventures, a group of Fantasy Island fans and former workers who have banded together to save the Grand Island theme park, outlined their hopes and dreams for its revival Thursday. Plans included Western New York-themed rides and restaurants, a possible Flying Bison Biergarten and ambitious ideas to grow the park back to its original size – and then some – over the next few years.

George Marenga, Jr., who has been named Empire's lease operations manager, owns an amusements company in Connecticut that provides rides for community carnivals. Empire brokered a deal to buy 14 vintage rides from Marenga, including a 24-horse vintage carousel, for \$5 million. Marenga said his company would deliver and install the rides after receiving a \$2.5 million down payment, and hold the note on the rest. The rides would be customized to be unique to Western New York flair, Empire Adventures CEO Bill Baldwin said.

But Empire officials don't know where they will get the millions of dollars they will need to carry out their plan. They said they have been meeting with three banks about financing, but nothing has been set. There also is a GoFundMe initiative in place, but that has only raised a little more than \$1,600.

Nevertheless, Marenga called the park a "diamond in the rough" and said the key to restoring it would be to get the park's management back to its family-focused roots, as it was under longtime owner Martin DiPietro's ownership. And he believes Empire has just the team to pull that off. "It's the teamwork, it's not corporate," he said.

In addition to Marenga, the team is led by Baldwin, who played Black Bart in the theme park's popular Wild West shootout show for 24 years, and COO Jay Wilcox, who was the park's maintenance manager for 20 years. "Once we heard that the park was closing, we had to step forward," Baldwin said at a news conference Thursday.

Empire is still negotiating the lease on the park with its owner, Arizona-based STORE Capital, and hopes to eventually buy the property. It is appraised at \$4.6 million. The group said it needs \$5 million to open the park, and is still meeting with banks to secure financing. It is also looking for community partnerships.

Eric Fiebelkorn, Grand Island Chamber of Commerce president, said it's "critical" for the property to succeed. Fantasy Island served an important function for surrounding businesses on the island, where families would stop to eat or shop before or after a visit to the park, he said.

"We struggle with getting people to come here, to do commerce and leave. Those bridges are a mental barrier sometimes, so for our businesses it can be a real challenge," Fiebelkorn said. "Fantasy island was always fantastic at bringing traffic in and creating a unique opportunity for our other businesses to capitalize on."

Apex Parks Group bought Fantasy Island from DiPietro for \$11 million in 2016 and leased the property from STORE. Apex operated the park (poorly, parkgoers said), before closing it in February and selling off its rides piece by piece. Two months later, Apex filed bankruptcy and defaulted on its lease payment, which ended up reverting the park's property and contents to STORE.

What remains at Fantasy Island is the Silver Comet roller coaster (minus its cars), the train ride and the water park. Fantasy Island's signature Ferris wheel, which can be seen from Interstate 190, is no longer operational and will have to be replaced, Baldwin said.

When Apex closed the park for the season, it did not weatherize, secure or protect the property. The park was left in disarray, and vandals and trespassers have since found their way in. Security and surveillance have recently been tightened, Empire said.

So far, a [GoFundMe fundraising drive](#) for the park has raised \$1,665 of its \$1 million goal. It includes more than \$200 raised by children who were former season pass holders.

Fiebelkorn acknowledged reviving the park will be a "tremendous undertaking" for Empire but said that of all the people he's met, they're the ones who have "the spirit and the heart to do it."

"If you find a successful small business, you usually find an owner or a group of people who have a tremendous heart in what they're doing," he said. "The rest we can figure out."