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How Michael Jackson built Neverland

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NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

While Michael Jackson's notorious TV interview has triggered a global controversy over his cosmetic surgery and his behavior with children, some locals are more shocked over the size, shape and scope of his Neverland ranch.

The pop star's interview with British journalist Martin Bashir, which aired last week in Britain and the U.S., offered seldom-seen glimpses of the 2,700-acre property on Figueroa Mountain Road in Los Olivos.

The documentary showed a dizzying array of 13 amusement park rides and revealed that Mr.

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Jackson has plans to add a roller coaster and even a water park.

In a county renowned for taking a hard line on rural development, the spectacle confounds many.

"I think he gets away with murder, and gets whatever he wants and whenever the county catches up with him, he'll just write a check," said Joan Scolari, who runs a ranch with her husband, LeRoy, in Lompoc.

"I think that some of Mr. Jackson's things are far beyond what should be allowed in the area," said Mr. Scolari. "This isn't something that belongs here."

Attorney Zia F. Modabber, who is a spokesman for Mr. Jackson, did not return calls for comment.

"I haven't seen anything like that before," said Kim Probert, a planner with Santa Barbara County Planning and Development. "I really don't know that the county thought it would be this big."

County records indicate that the King of Pop has gone to great lengths to build the park, adjusting the lot line on his property to create a four-acre parcel for his playground, which includes bumper cars, a steam train, a Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round.

Tony Urquidez, who owns Urquidez Construction Company, which built the amusement park, said Mr. Jackson had a good idea of what he wanted from the start.

"He always wanted to have an amusement park," he said. "If he could have more rides, he would. He always knew how he wanted it to look. We worked on a few rides, then added another one, and another one."

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Mr. Jackson's career began when he was 5, with much of his childhood dedicated to the Jackson Five. In the documentary, he lamented that show business often took priority over play time.

"I wanted to play sometimes and I couldn't because I had to go to the studio," he said.

The 44-year-old certainly has range to play now at his own amusement park.

Initial permits issued in 1990 allowed Mr. Jackson a car ride, a merry-go-round, and a Ferris wheel, spanning an area of more than 15,000 square feet.

"He had visions of doing the whole thing," said Evans Jones, Mr. Jackson's former architect.

"The first thing I did for Michael Jackson was a dance studio and a theater, then it grew to the amusement park. When he started these rides, I didn't envision it being any bigger."

Over the next two years, the county approved a "zipper" ride, followed by a 58-foot-high "Sea Dragon" structure that swings like a pendulum.

Finally, in 1993, Mr. Jackson got the green light for a cascading series of rides, including bumper cars, "Enterprise," "Wipe Out," "Falling Star," and "Rotar"-- a 100-foot-high slide, as well as an unspecified "future" ride.

Additional temporary rides, Mr. Urquidez said, "come and go," and include "all different kinds of things."

"They don't need to get permits for temporary stuff, because it is only there for one or two days," he added.

The amusement park is limited to Mr. Jackson's guests, often children brought in by his

charitable foundation. Despite the closed gate, it has become somewhat of an attraction in rural Los Olivos.

"It's like Disneyland, a big amusement park," said Gary Gordon, owner of Wind Haven Glider Rides, who used to fly curious fans over the property.

Ann Peyrat, 30, of Goleta, who accompanied a diabetes group to Neverland several years ago, echoed those sentiments.

"I felt like it was Disneyland because there was cheery music piped in as we played on the rides," she said. "It was hard to imagine that it was someone's house."

Absent from Mr. Jackson's amusement park development, however, is an environmental review by the county.

Steve De Camp, deputy director of the county Planning and Development office in the North County, defended the county's actions -- or lack of actions.

"Typically, when an application is filed, we look at whether it is categorically exempt, and then approve the project," said Mr. De Camp.

Because Mr. Jackson's property is considered a single-family, private dwelling -- albeit one with a zoo, including chimpanzees, giraffes, reptiles and elephants, as well as guest quarters, a game house, and a train hobby building -- Mr. De Camp said that the amusement park rides did not require environmental scrutiny.

"A couple of rides in your back yard don't trigger an environmental review," he added. "This county is very cognizant of its requirements under state law. We are less likely than most counties to let things slip through the system."

If the park were open to the public and charged for admission, the county would require Mr. Jackson's property to undergo environmental review, Mr. De Camp added. "Because it is for his own use, it is unlikely there would be any environmental effects."

But some development experts disagree.

"I have been really puzzled how someone can use agricultural property in this fashion," said Bud Laurent, executive director of Community Environmental Council. "It looks like Magic Mountain. I think there are some real, genuine issues there. If we subject farmers to environmental review, then certainly Jackson should undergo the same scrutiny. If I were on the surrounding property and I was depending on the same water table to water my crops, I would be very concerned. I would also want to know what sort of practices (Mr. Jackson) is using to sustain vegetation, and if he is using fertilizer and pesticides."

Tom Umenhofer, a consultant at Entrix, an environmental consulting firm, suggested Mr. Jackson's park sets a precedent for other projects. "If everyone built one of these on their property out there, it would be a very different environment. The question is: Is this kind of activity consistent with the area up there?"

A former Neverland employee pointed out that before the rides, there were just animals.

"It was just like a piece of bare ground, with a bunch of squirrels running around," said the employee, who asked not to be identified under a confidentiality agreement he signed with Mr. Jackson. "It was just like a carnival moved into a fairground."

But no one crashed the party, especially not county officials.

"If you don't have opposition to a project -- and with the Michael Jackson project, if nobody is crying out over it and the flags haven't been raised to the (Planning and Development) staff and there is no real community opposition -- then you are likely to see a project go through," said Naomi Kovaks, executive director of Citizens Planning Association. "Sometimes it takes neighbors to step forward for an environmental review to take place."

Neighbors Johanna and Fred Chamberlin, whose ranch is just south of Mr. Jackson's, said they sometimes hear the amusement rides, but they rarely see him.

"Sometimes, we can hear the train, but otherwise he is quiet," said Mrs. Chamberlin. "But our hearing isn't all that good."

Mr. De Camp conceded, "This is a unique situation and I have not seen anything quite like this. I am not sure what the original people in the project envisioned. Clearly this is bigger than we've seen before. This is probably a little bit more out of the ordinary than we've seen."

The uniqueness of Mr. Jackson's development may explain how the park expanded with minimal restrictions, some officials said.

"What it boils down to is that there is probably no one else in this town that has an amusement park and there is no ordinance for it," said Andy Caldwell of the Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business. "If a project doesn't require a permit and it is not flat-out restricted, then by default it is permitted and not subject to environmental review."

Attorney Susan Petrovich of Hatch & Parent, who helped Mr. Jackson obtain land use permits from the county, said, "Gosh, it was over 10 years ago. I don't really remember much. It was a good relationship with the county. I don't

remember any problems."

But many North County residents say it isn't always smooth sailing when it comes to their permit applications.

"The rough road given to agriculturalists is quite strenuous. I am quite sure that this is not the case of what has been done here. The rides are not agriculturally related by any stretch of the imagination," said Mr. Scolari.

On many development proposals, the county has championed protection of oak trees, endangered species and rural views, often clashing with the property owner's plans. Widely publicized development fracasas ranging from vineyard owners taking out trees in the North County to homeowner Diane Meyer Simon in the South County, who abandoned plans to install a skateboard ramp after encountering strong opposition from neighbors, show that the process is often drawn-out and expensive.

One example is Kevin Merrill, who manages Premier Coastal Vineyard in Santa Maria, and spent most of 1999 and \$100,000 on a biological assessment and attorney fees to get a permit to put in grape vines. He ended up setting aside 14 acres for tiger salamanders and developing the remaining 435 acres. "It was a very painstaking process," he said.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

In the documentary, Mr. Jackson played with a busload of disadvantaged children at the ranch, where they enjoyed his restored steam train and other rides.

"I buy them from companies around the world," Mr. Jackson told the children as they ate Sno-Cones. "I am getting a roller coaster next to go over there," he added, gesturing to an open stretch of tree-spotted land. "I am

going to build a water park on the other side of this mountain. So you can come in your swimsuit."

But his statements to his playmates, which come on the heels of child abuse allegations old and new, may stunt Mr. Jackson's plans to expand Neverland.

"I have the design drawings for the water park, but right now it's on hold," Mr. Urquidez said. "With everything going on, we held off."

County officials said it is unclear whether his proposals, if presented to the county, would be approved.

"I think that those activities are not typical of what we see," said the county's Mr. De Camp. "I would want to see if they need electrical permits, building permits, and what the state mandates for water parks and roller coasters. It would take some research to determine if it would be permitted."

"I am not sure that he is done with his backyard," said Mr. Urquidez. "He rides them all the time. He really enjoys them. It's like someone who gets a new car, their eyes light up. He did it for kids. I've seen really ill kids ride the stuff and their eyes are just bulging."

So may the eyes of county officials when they see proposals for additional rides.

"We typically have a reactive position, we look at (people's) plans with them and determine what the approval path is," said Mr. De Camp. "We would hope that people would live within the rules, but we are not a policing department."

Many locals are all too aware that the Planning and Development Department is often on the defensive.

"In most instances the review process is complaint driven," said Mr. Laurent, a former supervisor in San Luis Obispo County.

William Gillette, the county agricultural commissioner, indicated that while the majority of North County residents earn a living on their farms, Mr. Jackson literally spent his living on his ranch.

"I don't remember him saying how many rides he wanted. I have not seen anything like this. Nobody else has those types of things, nobody wants those types of things. Most farmers are out there trying to make a living. But I would assume those are not his day-to-day concerns."

LAND USE PERMITS

All rides are electrically powered except for the train, which runs on oil:

* September 1990

Ferris wheel

Merry-go-round

Go-carts, powered from the floor

* August 1991 "Zipper," revolving chairs that move up and down.

* April 1992

Sea Dragon, a pendulum-like swing that moves from side to side.

* June 1993

Steam train: It was transplanted from the East Coast, rebuilt and converted from propane to oil, after which Mr. Jackson named it after his mother, Katherine.

* December 1993

Bumper cars, powered from the floor

"Falling Star," a pendulum that can rotate 360 degrees.

"Enterprise," which consists of 20 gondolas with two riders each. The ride rotates clockwise, hurling the riders upside down.

"Wipe Out," passengers sit facing other as the ride spins and then tilts.

Slide

"Rotar"

An unspecified ride

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