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[00:00:16] **Katrina Michalak** There are ten operating roller coasters in the state of Arizona, scattered across different parks in landscapes. The number of theme parks within the state are even more scarce. Some may even remember the theme park Legend City, which was known to be the Disneyland of the Valley.

[00:00:39] **John Bueker** The new excitement of a musical adventure was yours in 82. Amuse you will be as you ride the new supercharged. The park opened in 1963 and had a 20 year run. It has a complex and colorful history for only 20 years of time. It was a big part of being a kid in Phoenix during that period or your decades later.

[00:00:58] **Katrina Michalak** And in a booming state. There have been no fruitful efforts to recreate a theme park in Arizona on the scale of a Legend City. Why is that? Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral about Metro, Phoenix and beyond. I'm producer Katrina Michalak. With summer just around the corner, I'm exploring our past endeavors regarding theme parks and peeking into future developments to see if they can explain our present theme park scene in the Valley, or lack thereof. To explain the current theme park scene. It's helpful to look at the last great attempt to develop a park on a Disneyland scale. Legend City. Legend City sat on the Phoenix Tempe border and operated from 1963 until 1983. Louis Crandall was the mastermind who built the park in his vision for bringing amusement into Arizona was successful at first. Even though Legend City was less than 100 acres. Its character allowed it to hold a candle to Disney's 500 acre space.

[00:02:40] **John Bueker** The original concept was for it to be an Old West amusement park that address different legends of Arizona history, like the Lost Dutchman mine ride, for example. So it wound up in later years being more of an amusement park with rides. But the original concept was genuine theme park, and I think that's what made it comparable to a Disneyland.

[00:03:02] **Katrina Michalak** This is John Bueker, also called the local authority on Legend City. Bueker went to the park as a kid and was entranced by Legend City, which prompted him to write a book about its ups and downs. Bueker is a returning guest on Valley 101. In 2019, Taylor Seely interviewed him in an episode dedicated to the legendary park. Bueker said he thinks a theme park in today's Arizona would be successful. The population in the Valley is much larger today than it was back when Legend City was operating. But he did raise a few questions about what a modern day park would look like.

[00:03:52] **John Bueker** An interesting question, though, is would it be an Old West theme park? The Old West isn't as popular now as it was back in the 60s. The cultural context of Legend City was during a time when the Old West was very popular. Half the shows on TV were Westerns, and a lot of the movies coming out of Hollywood were westerns, and we kids would play cowboy. And it was it was really popular, part of our culture. And that's not really the case anymore. So I'm not sure an Old West theme park would get the support, but it could be a component of a larger theme park like Disneyland has different lands. I certainly think a theme park could be very successful here now. The only question is exactly what would it look like?

[00:04:33] **Katrina Michalak** While Legend City has a historical impact in the Valley, it ran into multiple struggles that led to its closing. Finances and mismanagement were among the reasons the park shut down. But has this tainted future prospects?

[00:04:51] **John Bueker** Simply the failure of Legend City that cast quite a long shadow, and I think that discouraged a lot of potential investors over the years. Legend City's been gone for 40 years now, which is hard for me to believe, but we've heard a lot of talk in those 40 years about bringing back Legend City. But the failure of Legend City, I think, served as a deterrent. But, you know, it's been 40 years, and I don't think that that would be as much of a factor now than it used to be, but I think it was for quite some time.

[00:05:18] **Katrina Michalak** The ultimate fate of Legend City may have been one reason why Arizona has lacked a lucrative theme park for so long, but as John said, decades have passed since the park's closing in. Arizona is starting to see investors take a leap of faith in jumpstarting the entertainment industry again. Looking at future plans for the state provides some clues for the future. Investors have to find a way to maintain a theme park in the Valley's hot desert months.

[00:05:55] **Audio clip** Hi, Barbie.

[00:05:56] **Katrina Michalak** Hi. Mark Cornell is the co-founder of Mattel, a global toy and entertainment company that owns some of the most popular children's brands, including Barbie, American Girl Doll, Hot Wheels, and more. Mattel is currently developing a nine acre park and entertainment hub in Glendale called Mattel Adventure Park. Cornell said the heat has been a big factor that has turned other investors away from developing a theme park here. But his park model has found a way to beat the heat.

[00:06:36] **Mark Cornell** I found a conceptual business model where we can take an indoor theme park, load, unload and cue in air conditioning and then have those roller coasters, those rides, the train, the go karts, all sort of go outside and come back in. All of them load, unload and queue indoors. We have two Hot Wheels roller coasters. We have two Hot Wheels go karts. You know, we have a Thomas the Tank Engine. All of those rides start inside and go outside. All of the Thomas and friends, you know, family, kid rides are all indoors. Our Barbie Flying Theater is all indoors.

[00:07:19] **Katrina Michalak** The new park will feature two new roller coasters for Arizonans to try. The first one is.

[00:07:27] **Mark Cornell** Bone Shaker, and this family coaster is ultimately has a hot rod skull design in the front. It loads indoors, elevates on a lift through the roof to about 87ft, where it crest becomes a rooftop coaster, which is, you know, simply amazing. Max speed is only, you know, slightly over 30mph.

[00:07:52] **Katrina Michalak** In the second one is.

[00:07:55] **Mark Cornell** The twin mill is our thrill coaster, which literally has a dark ride experience in the beginning where audio and lighting thematics all play a big part of the experience. You get launched out of a tunnel into a double loop, into another corkscrew with four inversions. It's about 60mph in about three seconds, so it's quite a experience coming out of that tunnel. So we're super excited to debut and launch that coaster.

[00:08:24] **Katrina Michalak** Mattel's model of prioritizing indoor air conditioned space could be a key to having a theme park in Arizona. Mark also said the park aims to be open year round, which can attract visitors during the cooler, more bearable months. The diversity in the park rides also holds a key to catering to the wide range of demographics

who now reside in the Valley. Mark said the park is targeting an opening date in December.

[00:08:55] **Mark Cornell** I'm so glad that Arizona is our first location. The response that I've gotten from, you know, our friends here in Arizona has been extraordinary, and I just can't wait to share it with everybody here.

[00:09:08] **Katrina Michalak** Mattel Adventure Park has components of that amusement park scene. Arizona has been missing since Legend City closed, but a few smaller ones have stayed. There's also Castles N' Coasters and mountain rides, such as the upcoming Sunrise Apache Alpine Coaster. Now, you may be asking, what in the world is an alpine coaster or a mountain ride? Well, our newsroom ultimate Arizona reporter Tiffany Acosta broke down for us. The pros and cons of a mountain coaster versus a standard roller coaster.

[00:09:47] **Tiffany Acosta** A mountain coaster is basically a solo roller coaster that you get to control the speed of. So it's I think 1 or 2 persons could be on each little like cart or seating thing. But the disadvantage is that it's so far the mountain coaster is in the mountains and we are in the middle of the desert. If you want to go one, then you have to go up to Flagstaff or anywhere else where it's cooler, where the pines and stuff like that. That's one disadvantage, but an advantage is it's more individualized. You get to do it at your own pace. I feel with roller coasters it's like a really fast process. You wait in line for an hour and you're only on the ride for five minutes. It's it's annoying, but there is that kind of like thrill, like super, super fast with the mountain coaster is for everybody.

[00:10:34] **Katrina Michalak** Six Flags does have a park in Phoenix, though. It's not quite an amusement park in the way we're talking about park. Hurricane Harbor is a water park located in northern Phoenix.

[00:10:54] **Music** Tick tick tick tick.

[00:10:58] **Katrina Michalak** The space was previously Wet N' Wild before Six Flags acquired it back in 2019. Phoenix Park spokesperson Heather Austin gave us insight into the acquisition, saying its close proximity to other parks could be a perk for park goers.

[00:11:17] **Heather Austin** The original acquisition strategy back in 2019 was Six Flags looked at different water parks and theme parks that were near some of their other existing properties because they really wanted to push more than a single usage. So, for instance, Six Flags Magic Mountain in L.A., instead of you just buying a pass to go one time, if there could be a park close to that that you would buy a season pass, have access to both. That would encourage a season pass purchase. And so that was one of the reasons that our Six Flags, that Hurricane Harbor Phoenix was even acquired, is because it was something that there could create that proximity.

[00:11:58] **Tiffany Acosta** And I've talked about this topic with a lot of my friends, all my family, and we we asked the question, why isn't there an amusement park in Arizona?

[00:12:07] **Katrina Michalak** This question may be more complex than we think.

[00:12:13] **Tiffany Acosta** But if you think about it, Arizona is only hot for probably 3 to 4 months out of the whole year. And for us, like in the winter and fall, it gets cold. As a native Arizona in 70 degrees, it's cold for me. So if Arizona were to built, for example, a 65, which

is perfect for, you know, all type of demographics adults, college kids, even little kids, they would be open basically, let's say six, seven, eight months out of the whole year. And if they really want to close during the summer months, which they don't have to because Six Flags has a lot of water rides, they can do that. They could close for just three months and have it open for the rest of the year.

[00:12:52] **Katrina Michalak** Hurricane Harbor Phoenix operates typically from March around spring break through the middle of September. Their water rides in shady areas, Heather says, allows people to have fun while in the desert heat. Since Hurricane Harbor is strictly a water park and not a standard theme park, it's harder to stay open during the winter months.

[00:13:17] **Heather Austin** So we have looked at operating calendars. The water is not heated, so it really depends on the weather. If we get some rain or if it's a little bit chillier, March will see lower attendance even though we're open. And then in Arizona, families get really busy. So even in the fall when it's still hot, when that school year starts, you see a lot of kids are into their music and their sports activities, and so they don't maybe have as much free time.

[00:13:42] **Katrina Michalak** This busy schedule for many families could be another factor that inhibits theme park developments in the valley. But there's still the demand and the space for a potential development.

[00:13:56] **Tiffany Acosta** So there is such a huge opportunity for that. For Arizona to have an amusement park like Six Flags, because it's not like Disneyland. It's not like Disneyland, where it's like only in California, only in Florida, only in Paris, for example, Six Flags, it's everywhere. You can find a Six Flags in Chicago, in Texas, for example, to it's great. It's not like exclusive like Disney. So there's a huge opportunity for expansion here.

[00:14:20] **Katrina Michalak** One of the advantages of Hurricane Harbor is actually the space it had to expand.

[00:14:26] **Heather Austin** When you look at 35 acres, that's huge. And so there's the opportunity to expand, which we've been able to do recently. We did the Paradise Island expansion, which was a 4700 square foot expansion. It had areas for the younger kids. There's kind of a beach style entry. You can play basketball within the water there, and just a whole new area for people to kind of spread out and enjoy.

[00:14:50] **Katrina Michalak** Even though there's no active development of a Six Flags theme park in Arizona. Tiffany has a few ideas for location if any theme park plans were to come to fruition.

[00:15:03] **Tiffany Acosta** So Arizona is big. You have to drive anywhere and everywhere. It's not going to be a quick 5 or 10 minute drive, right? And Arizona's already very, very populated. So the locations that I was thinking that could be a Six Flags or any type of amusement park could be Chandler, for example. Chandler is growing in both population. They're building a lot of stuff. Recently they built a indoor Go-Kart called Andretti ,super cool. They have arcade, they have bowling, they have laser tag. They have a lot of stuff there. It's huge. Maybe Apache Junction. I know it's far, but I'm thinking about space, you know, parking wise.

[00:15:40] **Katrina Michalak** Despite Hurricane Harbor not being a standard theme park, Heather says she's still grateful for a Six Flags location in Arizona.

[00:15:50] **Heather Austin** We kind of treat it like we would going to a theme park. We plan out our visit, we plan out what rides we're going to go to. We plan out where we're going to meet up. So creating that really kind of unique experience has been a pleasure. Just as a mom getting to go to the park. And so I think I just appreciate that we have a Six Flags in Arizona that we have something to offer families.

[00:16:09] **Katrina Michalak** By looking into the past, we can learn from the mistakes Legend City made during its operation. We can look into the future of Mattel's adventure park and take notes about the business model Cornell is using to combat Arizona's heat. There's the demographic for a theme park to be a massive hit in our present. These past and future developments could offer us notes in order to develop a present day theme park in Arizona that could be successful. Before we go, Tiffany raised one more selling point for Arizona.

[00:16:50] **Tiffany Acosta** Arizona has the space. It has the hype, it has a population because a lot of people may think, why would I want to go to an amusement park in Arizona, when you can drive to California and visit all these other amusement parks, right? Well, California's super crowded. California's kind of far and you drive. California is more expensive than Arizona, and Arizona just is more chill. I would say, even though it is getting more and more populated, it still has that space. And if people are still complaining about the heat, it's too hot for an amusement park. Why not build an indoor amusement park like they have in Dubai? Dubai is super hot and we can take some notes.

[00:17:28] **Katrina Michalak** Tiffany is referring here to the Dreamworks Animation Park in Dubai.

[00:17:33] **Tiffany Acosta** It's all indoors and it's super, super big. It kind of looks like a big old dome, but it's all indoors and they have roller coasters, they have a waterpark, they have a bunch of like little attractions that could be even an option in Arizona.

[00:17:50] **Katrina Michalak** Oh, it's too hot in Arizona. Well, when you're 300ft in the air riding.

[00:17:56] **Tiffany Acosta** On a roller coaster.

[00:17:57] **Katrina Michalak** Valley 101 is a podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com.

[00:18:04] **Tiffany Acosta** Going down, accelerating, wind is blowing in your face. You're not going to be thinking about... Literally.

[00:18:11] **Katrina Michalak** If you enjoyed this episode, share it with your friends. And if you haven't already, make sure you're subscribed. Don't forget to rate and review us and go ahead, give us five stars. Remember to submit your questions about Phoenix and Arizona to valley101.azcentral.com. Your question might be in our next episode. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at [@azcpodcasts](https://twitter.com/azcpodcasts).

[00:18:45] **Tiffany Acosta** What a gust of wind.

[00:18:51] **Katrina Michalak** This episode was written and produced by me, Katrina Michalak. Kaely Monahan and Amanda Luberto provided additional production support. Kara Edgerson provided production oversight. Music for this and all our shows comes from Universal Production Music. Valley 101 is an Arizona Republic and azcentral.com production. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next week.