

Making over the flea market

Mile High Marketplace features vendors, events

by Caroline Kipp
Staff Writer

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Boy, have they got stuff.

The old flea market famous for that radio spot has a new owner, a new name, and a new look, but the new Mile High Marketplace still has a lot of stuff – more than 1,500 vendor spaces worth of it.

New CEO Jim Hurrell bought the old flea market in 2007 and has spent time and \$3 million giving it a makeover. Now, the Mile High Marketplace features events, rides, a farmers' market, Antique Alley, stores that sell new merchandise such as furniture and women's accessories, an art gallery and even a vintage lunch box display.

"We want to be a festive family–fun destination," Hurrell said, adding that landscaping to add shade, flowers and a new water feature has been a priority. "We wanted to soften it up."

The vendor spaces are 98 percent full, Hurrell said, including a number of permanent fixtures like a coffee shop, women's boutique, new furniture store and "A Paris Apartment," which features some older and refurbished furniture. A food vendor sells more than 5,000 turkey legs every weekend, and there is a new Mexican market.

The new event center is 25,000 square feet and has hosted a number of events this year and last. It hosted the Mile High Blues Festival earlier this month. It will host Oktoberfest in September and a haunted house in October.

"It's a versatile space," Hurrell said.

This weekend, the marketplace will host Zoppe Italian Family Circus inside a new tent the circus put up just for this event.

Between 23,000 and 25,000 people visit the marketplace each weekend.

Roxanna Nicoletti was one of them Friday. Usually the Aurora resident goes hunting for treasures at garage sales, but this time, she decided to try out the marketplace.

"It's nice," she said. "There's lots of places all at once. It's a big mall without actually being in a mall."

The old flea market was founded in 1976 and first set up at the Mile High Kennel Club in Commerce City, said Hurrell, who has worked for the market since 1988. After nine years setting up and tearing down nightly at that location, the owner, Andy Hermes, wanted to find a space that could be a little more permanent. He bought the 80 acres near Interstate 76 and 88th Avenue and moved the market there in 1987.

Hurrell, who started with the Mile High Flea Market as a freelance marketing specialist, became a full-time employee in 1990. He hasn't wanted to move since.

"It was never the same thing twice," he said.

By 2006, Hermes was getting older and starting to think about selling the market. Hurrell was thinking seriously about buying it. By 2007, he found some investors and closed the sale.

Even with all the changes, Hurrell says the market's history will always be in place.

"The flea market will always be the backbone of the marketplace," Hurrell said. "It's what we're built on."

Margaret Wilson has been selling jewelry in spot N-25 for 20 years. Her corner space started as an open lot, but now she is surrounded by a purple building – one of the more than 400 unique storefronts.

She has some regular customers and gets some new ones each weekend. She said over the years the number of shoppers has decreased at the flea market, and she wants the new owners to focus on bringing in customers.

"There's some fun stuff out here," she said. "You'll find some good treasures if you try hard."