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Skating will roll on at rink in Eatontown

Despite ownership change, operator expects to continue through 2005

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EATONTOWN — Contrary to rumor, the Eatontown Roller Rink will remain open for roller skating for the rest of 2005 and maybe even 2006, according to the rink's manager.

Upon entering the nearly 33-year-old rink on a Sunday afternoon during a public session, one will find children skating along the shining, oblong-shaped hardwood floor as party music from Kool and The Gang and K.C. and the Sunshine Band and other musicians of the disco era plays overhead.

Some of the skaters roll along skillfully, while others rock slightly as they struggle to maintain their balance by stretching out their arms. Floor supervisors and some parents and other adults skate around the children, ready to lend a hand or help the less-experienced skaters find their balance.



PHOTOS BY SEAN BRADY Above, a sign in the lobby of the

Eatontown Roller Rink states it will remain in business through 2006. At left, Michelle and Peter Marrucca, of Neptune, rent skates from Ryan Maguire.

True, business at the longtime Route 35 landmark is not rocking and rolling like it did back in the skating heyday of the 1970s and early 1980s, but rink operator Richard Jones believes that the weekend offerings of roller hockey, public skating and birthday parties will be enough to help the operation stay afloat.



With computer games, the Internet, and free outdoor skate parks now available in many towns, children's recreational interests have changed, Jones acknowledges.

Jones sold his interest in the rink operation to an Ocean Township investment group 18 months ago, but unless the town finds something to replace the 23,000-square-foot roller rink, he can't think of any reason to close up shop.

Until the borough's Planning Board or Zoning Board of Adjustment formally approves a site plan and grants any needed variances for a new occupant on the property, the skating operation will roll on, he said.

"I'm optimistic that we're going to remain here for at least six months to two years," Jones said. "A lot of things have to happen before the roller rink closes, the main thing being some type of approval by the planning or zoning board."

When that happens, Jones plans to hang a sign on the outside door that says: "No skating anymore. Rink closed. Thanks for the memories. Gone fishing."

Those words are at the end of a printed notice posted inside the building's foyer. In the same notice, Jones explains that skating will continue into 2006 and "maybe into 2007."

More prominently, on another wall, another notice reads, "We are not closing anytime in the near future."

In short, through those signs, Jones wants everyone to know he is not going anywhere now.

"There will be plenty of notice and a big sign on the highway will proclaim when there are just a couple of months left and the countdown will begin," one notice reads.

The land that the rink and its parking lot occupy, though formerly zoned for light manufacturing use, is now zoned for retail/commercial use, according to Peggy Ciok of Eatontown's planning and zoning office.

An application has been submitted to the borough for a strip shopping center by the property owner, Site Management Inc. of Oakhurst, the entity that purchased Jones' interest as well as that of the Elizabeth-based co-owner, America on Wheels Inc., in July 2002.

However, that application is on hold pending the applicant's contribution to the borough's Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) trust fund, Ciok explained. The exact amount of that contribution has yet to be negotiated between the borough and the applicant, she said.

The property's future is somewhat dependent upon the success of the Lowe's Home Improvement Center now under construction across Route 35 on the site of the former Bendix plant, Jones said.

"It makes a great retail space," he said.

A rink such as that in Eatontown usually measures 20,000 to 25,000 square feet, which is generally the space needed by a single retailer such as a department store or a small strip mall, Jones said.

The building that now houses the rink was originally an A&P supermarket before its owner sold it in the early 1970s to America on Wheels, a company that once owned and operated numerous rinks throughout the country.

America on Wheels then converted it to a skating rink and opened it amid much fanfare in June 1973, said Jones, who first took a job at the Eatontown operation four years later.

Pipe organ music, which originally played overhead as skaters filled the rink's perimeter, was soon replaced by disco music, which was all the rage by the late 1970s. Still, skating went on, just to a different, syncopated disco beat.

A mirrored disco ball bordered by colored lights still remains centered above the rink. Jones keeps the ball there except during roller hockey sessions.

On many nights in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was not unusual to see large crowds of roller skaters at the rink, whether on the floor, at the snack bar, or playing pinball machines on a Friday or Saturday night, Jones said.

"Cars would be lined up with parents dropping their kids off," Jones recalled. "People had this feeling that they were

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