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Club's volcano nearly extinct

Demolition of Kahunaville landmark gets under way

By *ROBIN BROWN*
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The crunch of heavy equipment's biting jaws Thursday began the demise of Delaware's best-known volcano.

Demolition of the icon of the former Kahunaville restaurant-nightclub on Wilmington's Riverfront -- passed by thousands of motorists on I-95 daily -- is to be completed after Monday's groundbreaking for the building's new occupant.

Officials of the planned \$16 million Delaware Children's Museum hoped to save the volcano, constructed in the early 1990s, but found they would have to spend tens of thousands of dollars to make the 48-foot structure safe enough for the possibility of climbing kids.

Driving through the area, Superior Court Judge M. Jane Brady paused to see the volcano, long considered Wilmington's best kitschy roadside Americana, nearly one-third gone.

"The loss of the landmark is to be lamented, but the plan for the children's museum is just tremendous," Brady said.

"I'm excited," she said. "I expect to be back here a lot with my 2-year-old."

As more chunks crunched from the volcano -- the symbol of Kahunaville's role as a playground for grown-ups -- Kevin Parkinson, in charge of demolition, said he will bring in high-reach equipment Tuesday to remove its top 18 feet, then tackle its heavy-beam frame.

"It's probably going to take us three days," said Parkinson, who also demolished another landmark, the Stone Balloon in Newark. "We've got to unbolt the steel because we can't use torches, for the safety of the building."

The job, Parkinson said, held just one surprise, a groundhog living in an edge of the volcano. "They're trying to trap him now," he said.

Such wildlife is a far cry from the site's heyday as the hot spot of city nightlife. The tiki-themed club was young adults' place to be for mingling, mixed drinks and music. Later, part of the building became the Red Room, a sleek-style lounge.

Before Kahunaville's sudden closing in November 2006, entertainment ranged from arcade games to football parties to lingerie shows. Starting in 1994, its outdoor stage hosted performers as big as Bob Dylan, the Black Crowes and George Thorogood and the Delaware Destroyers.

But Thursday, John Pool of K&L Renovations was the one doing the destroying. He ran a track hoe excavator, manipulating its grapple to grab chunks of the volcano's painted canvas, foam, drywall and steel.

Pool said this was only his second time at Kahunaville, but he never made its nightclub scene: "The first time I was here was demolishing the interior."

Still, he said, he was glad to be there for volcano-removal duty, saying, "Now, literally, I can finally say I moved a mountain."

And as he did so, the sight stopped many passers-by, including bicyclist Ted Wirbisky of Bellefonte.

"It's a landmark gone ... even if it was fake," said Wirbisky, 50, a self-employed information technology contractor. "There's going to be a lot of people drive by and wonder what happened."

Those who long for the club's bygone era, however, need only go as far as Cecil County, Md., to reminisce under its palm trees.

When Parkinson managed the interior demolition in August 2008, he did some recycling to help some of its decor avoid the landfill.

The palm trees, totem pole and half the bar have a new life at the Chesapeake Inn on Second Street in Chesapeake City.

"People love them," said owner Gianmarco Martuscelli, adding their motif is a perfect fit with the inn's lower-level deck.

Exterior light poles and two weird-faced totems still flanking the club's former entrance are to be recycled at the inn, where the owner has another link to Kahunaville.

"I used to go there when I was a kid," he said.

Martuscelli said he hoped the children's museum would be able to save the volcano.

"It's sad to see it come down," he said. "It's a Delaware landmark."



An excavator Thursday removes the exterior of the volcano attached to the former Kahunaville nightclub on the Wilmington Riverfront.
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The claw of an excavator pulls the foam-and-canvas exterior off Kahunaville's volcano Thursday to expose its steel frame, which is scheduled to be detached from the building and dismantled next week.