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Levee targets older audience

Mature night out attraction in Ky.

By Patrick Crowley, pcrowley@enquirer.com
 The Cincinnati Enquirer

NEWPORT — Greater Cincinnati has never partied as it can at Newport on the Levee.

Unlike some of the region's established entertainment and nightlife districts, Newport on the Levee combines bars, restaurants, dance clubs, shops and attractions in a compact riverfront venue.

"There is absolutely nothing like Newport on the Levee in Cincinnati," said restaurant operator Jeff Ruby, who is planning to open this summer the Tropicana, a restaurant and bar named for the Tropicana Club casino that thrived during Newport's days as a mecca for illegal gambling.

"My concept has always been to have a lot going on in a place. People socializing, celebrity-watching, a lot of 'eye candy,' a lot of action," Mr. Ruby said. "That's what you have with Newport on the Levee. It's a lot of variety, but it's all in one spot."

Certainly other places offer much of what can be found at the Levee.

But no place pulls that combination together like the \$215 million Levee.

With capacity for more than 4,000 drinkers and diners spread out over 10 riverfront acres, restaurants and bars with riverfront decks offer up Cincinnati's skyline with their fare.

Roads, including the route from Interstate 471, have been altered to steer traffic into the Levee. The project includes the Newport Aquarium. It is next to the riverfront area Newport is using for festivals, including this weekend's Festa Italiana. And it's adjacent to the L&N Bridge, which is being converted to a pedestrian walkway.

The Levee is selling safety, accessibility, variety,



Tim Clarke, of Silverton, and Gregg Kunes, right, a server at GameWorks, compete in a game called "Dance Dance Revolution" while Mr. Clarke's friends watch.

(Patrick Reddy photos) | [ZOOM](#) |

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shopping, food and lots of opportunities to have a drink.

"Newport on the Levee can be whatever somebody wants it to be," said Deborah Thompson of GameWorks, which offers more than 100 video games, three bars and a restaurant over 25,000 square feet.

"You can come down and relax, have some drinks, eat dinner and see a movie," Mrs. Thompson said.

Nearby young men and women rocked side to side in Indy-style race cars positioned in front of massive screens that displayed computer-generated speedways. Other patrons battled aliens and criminals, hit golf balls and shot hoops, rode wave runners and motorcycles and even caught fish — all of the action taking place on loud, colorful video screens.

Mr. Ruby — operator of the Waterfront, the Precinct and other area restaurants — compares the Levee to urban entertainment and tourist districts in other cities, including the Riverwalk in San Antonio. .

Cincinnati's loss?

The project, Mr. Ruby said, is another example of Northern Kentucky aggressively attracting entertainment and tourist dollars at the expense of Cincinnati.

"Cincinnati wants The Banks," Mr. Ruby said, referring to the development plan for Cincinnati's riverfront that is still in the conceptual phase.

"But I'll be dead by the time that happens," he said. "It'll be 2092."



Flames leap from the skillet as Stu Rutherford, a chef at Mitchell's Fish Market, prepares a dish.
| [ZOOM](#) |

Already the Levee is taking business away from other places, said Lou Rio, manager of the Brio Tuscan Grille.

"We're seeing people come over from Cincinnati for lunch," Mr. Rio said. "They can valet park for a buck and be back in their office in an hour. We know because we see the license plates."

On the weekends, Mr. Rio has seen waiting lists of two hours or more. The same is true at Mitchell's Fish Market, where there is a wait on the weekend from early afternoon until after 10 p.m.

"I don't know where they are all coming from," said Steve Singleton, the Fish Market's general manager. "But they are coming from somewhere, eating here instead of eating where they used to."

In an area the size of Greater Cincinnati there are only so many dollars to be spent on restaurants, bars and

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entertainment, said Ron Santibanez, a southern California restaurant consultant.

“When you have a new hot spot, a new destination, it is going to be very popular at first,” Mr. Santibanez said. “Now whether or not they can be sustained depends on how well the development is run, how good the food is, the quality of the service, etc.”

“But when people are coming to the new hot spot, it is at the expense of somebody else.”

In one way Newport on the Levee is designed to appeal to families. Part of the complex includes the \$40 million Newport Aquarium. Gameworks has lots of games and activities for kids. There is also Sweet Dreams Candy Co., Cold Stone Creamery, the AMC theaters, a Barnes & Noble bookstore, the Firststar IMAX and Johnny Rockets, a '50s-style malt shop.

A Night at the Levee

But after dark, the Levee is becoming one of Cincinnati's hottest night spots.

Covington lawyer Rob Sanders, 29, walked up the levee's outdoor staircase on the way to meet friends at The Claddagh Irish Pub, already becoming known for its heaping portions of fish and chips.

“One of reasons me and my friends come here is that it's a little more grown up than the MainStrasse and Main Street bars,” Mr. Sanders said. “It's a good mix. It's not an old folks home, but it's not for teeny-boppers, either.”

That's all by design, said David Wechsler, executive vice president of Steiner & Associates, the Levee's Columbus-based developer.

“We're going to have bars, but it's not going to be all college kids,” Mr. Wechsler said.

“We are not putting in more night clubs,” he said. “We are not trying to really attract that (Main Street) group. We're more young-professional-oriented, a place where people feel comfortable coming here, going to dinner and a late movie and maybe going to a bar.”

Parking, safety

Greater Cincinnatians are used to partying in urban neighborhoods that feature bars, restaurants, art galleries and shops — a description that fits at Mount Adams, Main Street and MainStrasse Village.

In those places, parking is often an issue — as it is at the Levee, which features an underground garage that quickly becomes crowded on the weekends. Safety also is sometimes a concern, particularly on the streets away from the main entertainment districts.

Scott Meyers, 29, a teacher and coach at Newport High

School, used to spend more time on Main Street in Cincinnati, an area just north of downtown in Over-the-Rhine catering mainly to the 20-something bar crowd.

Yet given some of the problems with crime and racial unrest in Cincinnati, Mr. Meyers has been hanging out more at the Levee.

"It's not only new and different, but it just feels a lot safer than other places," Mr. Meyers said.

Amy Jackson, a manager at the Mount Adams Bar and Grill, said the Levee has not seemed to dent business in Mount Adams.

"Obviously, downtown has had its problems, and we've picked up some business from that," Ms. Jackson said. "But we really haven't been affected by (Newport on the Levee). I think people tend to go over there more doing the week because it's more dining than drinking, but they are still coming up here on the weekends."

Nonetheless, operators of Levee restaurants make from 30 to 50 percent of their business from alcohol sales. Most are geared to the drinking crowd, with lounges and outdoor tables.

Big on booze

GameWorks — where you must be 18 or older after 10 p.m. — plans to open an outdoor bar this summer.

Brio has a martini night. The Claddagh specializes in pints of Irish ales. Mitchell's Fish Market is considering starting a happy hour.

But the real party place is the Empire.

Karen Chitwood and Lori Alig bounded up the steps from the Levee's first level up to Empire. Both 40 years old and long-time friends from Boone County, the pair was out for a night on the town.

After having dinner and drinks at Claddagh, the women were ready to dance at Empire, a 27,000-square-foot club that features two dance areas — one playing '80s and pop, the other hard-thumping techno — separated by a sports bar filled with pool tables. The club stays open until 4 a.m., though it must stop serving alcohol before that.

"We still like Main Street, and we go there a lot," Mrs. Alig said as she moved toward the dance floor. "But this place is just a lot of fun. Plus it's new, and that makes it a good place to go because it's something different."

Greg Jones, manager at The Claddagh, agrees that a lot of Levee's attraction right now is that it is unique in the market.

"The way we view it, if we produce great food and great service each day, we become a choice because of that," Mr. Jones said. "Not because of what side of the river we are on."

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