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New Bern KOA Joins KOA System

by Dennis Gaub, for KOA Kompass

The payback from his first KOA campground franchise convinced a North Carolina real-estate developer to buy another campground in the Tarheel State and bring it into the KOA system, too.

Joel Tomaselli and his son, Micah, are co-owners of the New Bern KOA, scheduled to open on January 1.

The elder Tomaselli said he bought an "old dilapidated" campground in Wilmington, North Carolina, in the mid-1990s for the land value, using campground revenue to pay for the property.

He explained what happened after that:

"We fixed it up a little bit and then were able to get the KOA franchise starting in 2001. And the KOA franchise doubled the sales volume of the campground over a two-year period. Now it's a viable business.

"I was so impressed with KOA and the power of the brand and their systems, and so impressed with (KOA President) Jim Rogers that when the opportunity came to buy another campground, we took it."

Tomaselli had been looking at a 20-acre campground in New Bern, along the Neuse River, for a couple years. Although it offered a "perfect" setting along with striking scenery, the location – a two-hour drive north of Wilmington – and the extensive renovation that would be required kept him from acting until last year. That's when his son, who had just graduated from college and had worked at the Wilmington KOA, was looking for his own project, according to Tomaselli.

The Tomasellis bought the New Bern facility in September, closed it and spent the rest of the year getting the campground ready for reopening.

Tomaselli described the 25-year-old campground as "really run down" when he and his son began work there.

The pair updated all utilities; brought in fill to get the property to grade; and put new gravel on all roads. They also completely rebuilt the registration building and gave the rest of the campground a facelift: new playground, new pool, new cabins, new lodges, new pavilion, new sheds and storage.

The campground adjoins a river that's a mile across – wide enough to offer sunrises and sunsets over the water.

"It's idyllic to sit on the riverfront and look at the marinas and the sailboats," Tomaselli said.

Also, "it's a great spot for bass fishing; you can bring a bass boat and launch it right from the campground."

Tomaselli said the campground will rent canoes, kayaks, paddleboats, giving visitors another way to enjoy a "spectacular" river.

The campground's conveniently lies near the intersection of two US highways: 17, a

primary north-south route, and 70, the main road from Raleigh to Morehead City and the Outer Banks.

Once at the campground, visitors will find New Bern to be "one of the most picturesque, little historical riverfront towns," with a well-preserved historic downtown full of unique shops, Tomaselli said.

Major attractions include:

- Tyron Palace Historic Sites and Gardens, known in colonial times as one of the most beautiful public buildings in America. The Georgian-style mansion served as both home of Royal Governor William Tyron and North Carolina's colonial capitol.
- Attmore-Oliver House, a 1790s home that is a headquarters for the New Bern Historical Society. Exhibits include 18th and 19th century furniture, New Bern historical artifacts, Civil War artifacts and a doll collection.
- Birthplace of Pepsi. At this pharmacy, Caleb Bradham invented "Brad's Drink," which later he patented as Pepsi Cola. Visitors can enjoy a Pepsi Cola at the recreated soda fountain.
- New Bern Tours, a 90-minute trolley car tour of downtown architectural and historical sites.

The campground offers 85 campsites, 75 with utilities; of those, 50 have full hookups. The facilities include about a dozen "patio sites" with 50-amp service, plus three 1-room cottages, two 2-room cottages and two lodges.

Plans call for opening all facilities by April 1.

The Tomasellis have hired Nancy and Ken Dawson as on-site campground managers.

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