

TOP OF THE NEWS

**Nation/World**

» **Syria:** Arab League suspends monitoring mission in Syria, saying it's too dangerous. **A3**  
 » **Veterans:** Parade in St. Louis is the first big welcome-home for veterans of Iraq War since withdrawal in December. **A14**

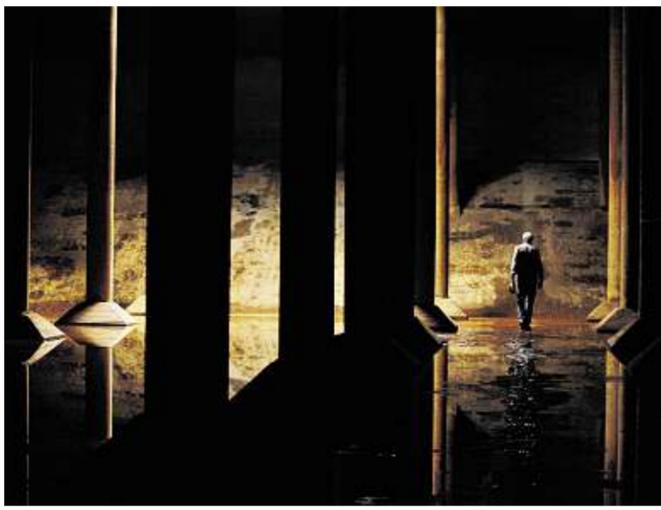
**City & State**

» **NASA:** Would new rocket be a boon for spaceflight or lay the groundwork for its demise? **B1**  
 » **Leland Woods:** After initially failing to take off, community is getting a second chance at growth. **B1**

**Star**

**City's dark, lovely secret below ground**

Long ago drained, the city's underground reservoir near Buffalo Bayou and Sabine Street, right, is startling both for its beauty and its potential. Columnist Lisa Gray explores its depths. **G5**



Mayra Beltrán / Houston Chronicle

**Sports**

» **Still scorching:** The Rockets whip the Knicks 97-84 for their ninth win in 10 games. **C1**

**Business**

» **Local entrepreneurs:** Loren Steffy sat down with 12 leaders of area small businesses and found one thing new this year: an upbeat vibe. **D1**

**The Good Life**

» **Mexico:** The eco-friendly Mayakoba resort along the Riviera Maya offers travelers a green cocoon of indulgence. **J1**

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**GALVESTON**



Johnny Hanson / Houston Chronicle

Dining and entertainment empire-builder Tilman Fertitta is working toward an opening in late May for his new Galveston Island Pleasure Pier, which will jut out 1,000 feet over the surf at Seawall Boulevard and 25th Street.

**Savvy native son looks to recapture Isle's past**

**Fertitta resurrecting iconic Pleasure Pier built in 1943**

By David Kaplan

As a boy growing up in Galveston, Tilman Fertitta rode his bike up and down the Seawall. He went to fairs and carnivals when they hit town and had a season pass to Sea-Arama Marineworld. In high school he worked as a lifeguard at the Flagship Hotel and engaged in another beach town tradition — flirting with

out-of-town girls. Now Fertitta, who built a fortune with a showman's flair, is resurrecting one of Galveston's most iconic tourist attractions — the Pleasure Pier. The \$60 million project will put a roller coaster and Ferris wheel over the Gulf of Mexico and is expected to encourage visitors to extend their trips to the island. It's the latest waterfront



Houston Chronicle

venture in Fertitta's dining and entertainment empire. "Subliminally, Galveston has had a huge impact on me," Fertitta said in his first detailed public comments on the project. "I realized how

people flock to the water. You are always going to do a lot of business by the water."

Construction is under way. After its scheduled late-May opening, the Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier will jut out 1,000 feet over the surf at 25th Street, where the original Pleasure Pier stood from 1943 until it was destroyed by Hurricane Carla in 1961. More recently, it was the site of the Flagship, an over-the-water hotel built in 1965 that was demolished after 2008's Hurricane Ike.

The project will feature 16 rides, carnival games and souvenir shops. Food vendors will offer sausage-on-a-stick and other tourist favorites. And it

*Pier continues on A8*

**Problems persist at county's lockup**

Last year, Sheriff's Office disciplined 88 working at jail for various offenses

By James Pinkerton

A female jailer ordered, without authorization, an entire cellblock of women prisoners to strip naked during a July 2010 search. She's still on the job.

Another jailer punched a seriously ill inmate as he lay in the infirmary in May 2010. The inmate died the next day, and the jailer's punishment: one day in jail.

Last year, a sergeant slugged an inmate so hard it took 14 staples to close a gash over his eye. The sergeant said the inmate raised his hands to hit him, but other jailers swore the inmate didn't. The sergeant was fired but not charged with a crime. He's fighting to return.

These incidents and dozens of others highlight how the Harris County Jail, one of the busiest in the nation, continues to experience problems similar to those cited in a 2009 U.S. Department of Justice report critical of the use of excessive force against inmates.

A Houston Chronicle review of disciplinary records indicates that from 2008 through 2010, more than 200 jail employees were disciplined for various offenses, some serious and others minor.

*Jail continues on A19*



**INTRIGUE IN PANAMA**

**2 Texas pilots in limbo amid rumors of DEA plot**

By Dane Schiller

A ranking California congressman contends two Houston-area pilots arrested in Panama were unknowingly snared in a botched money-laundering operation by the Drug Enforcement Administration, which did nothing to stop the innocent Americans from going to prison. But sources told the

Houston Chronicle on Saturday it was not a DEA case and the claims are rooted in a fast-talking occasional DEA informant who was a passenger on the private jet and tried to squirm out of getting busted with \$2.3 million in dirty money last May. "He just got caught," said a source familiar with events. "It appears it was an informant who was do-

ing it without the knowledge of the DEA. They do that all the time. They play both sides (of the law)." U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., head of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, wrote to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder on Friday to say he'd received "quite unsettling" information about a DEA money-laundering operation that

landed the pilots in prison. It was the latest in a string of accusations against federal law enforcement by Issa, who has been vociferously critical of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and its bungled undercover gun-running operation known as "Fast and Furious." ATF allowed people suspected of

*Pilots continues on A19*



Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle

Kim Young, holding the ashes of her uncle, Herman Young, is upset that she was never told her uncle was assaulted in jail by a deputy.



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**Weather**

**Mostly sunny, High 64, Low 45**  
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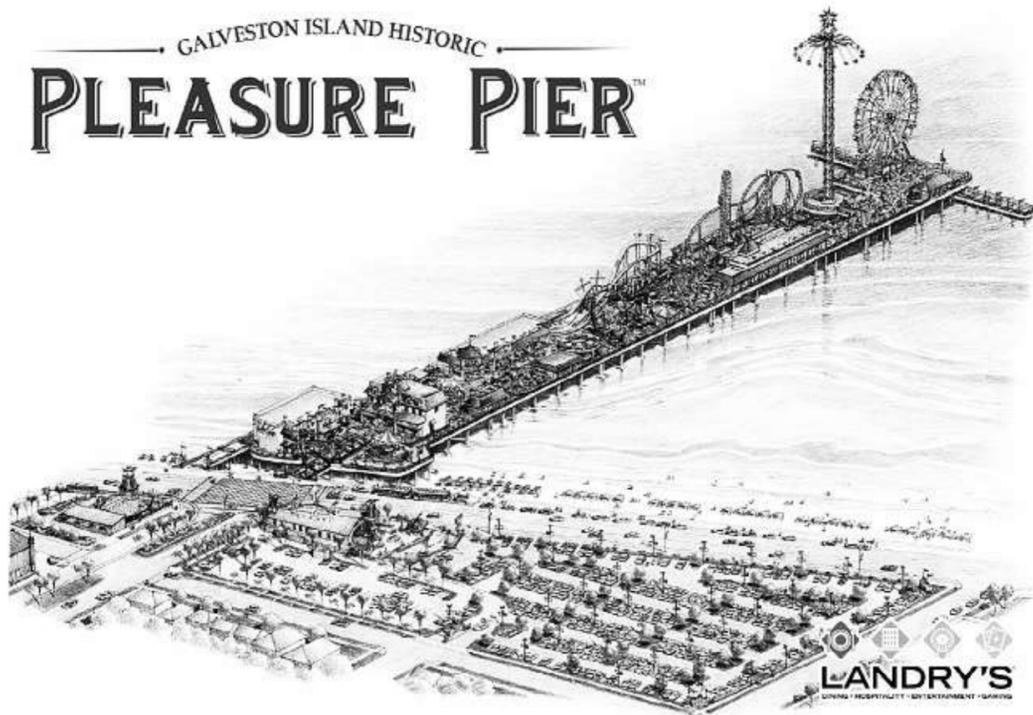


**Only in the Chronicle**

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FROM THE COVER

# Original destroyed by hurricane in '61



Landry's artist rendering

Mayor Joe Jaworski says the new Pleasure Pier entertainment venue, scheduled to open this summer in Galveston, should boost tourism on the Seawall and encourage visitors to extend their stays on the island.

**Pier from page A1**

will house the state's first Bubba Gump Shrimp Co., which Fertitta owns through his Houston-based Landry's.

Fertitta said he aims to make the Pleasure Pier a first-rate waterfront tourist spot on par with the Navy Pier in Chicago and Santa Monica Pier in Southern California.

Most of the rides will be unique to Southeast Texas, said Mark Kane, regional director of Landry's theme park division.

**Historic precedents**

The area around Seawall and 25th has historically been a tourist hub.

Before the original Pleasure Pier, there was another amusement venue across the boulevard: Electric Park, built in 1906, featured vaudeville shows, rides, trinkets, a restaurant and a man covered in tattoos. The rides lit up at night, said Dwayne Jones, executive director of the Galveston Historical Foundation.

The original Pleasure Pier featured rides, an arcade, an aquarium, concessions and fishing at the end of the pier, Jones said.

High-profile rides at the new Pleasure Pier will include the Iron Shark Steel Roller Coaster, a 100-foot-tall structure offering four 360-degree inversions and a back stretch that cantilevers over the water; the Texas Star Flyer, which will swing riders over the water 230 feet above the Gulf; and a 100-foot-tall Ferris wheel called Galaxy Wheel with programmable LED lights, Kane said.

Visitors will have to pay an admission fee, not yet set, to enter the amusement area. But diners at Bubba Gump won't have to pay to enter, said Jeff Cantwell, Landry's senior vice president of development.

Fertitta acquired the 33-unit Bubba Gump seafood chain soon after taking Landry's private in 2010. Many of the Gump restaurants are in tourist spots internationally, from Bali

**The new Pleasure Pier**

On the site of an iconic Galveston amusement park, construction for a new one is under way. In addition to a roller coaster and Ferris wheel that will extend over the surf, highlights are to include:

**Family-oriented rides:**

The Pirate's Plunge water ride for thrill-seekers and kiddie rides for the little ones.

**Tourist staples:**

Food kiosks hawking many items, from hotdogs to funnel cake.

**Souvenir shops:**

Numerous retail operations, including an old-fashioned candy store and gift shop.

**Carnival games:** Among them, darts, Whac-A-Mole and ball and ring tosses.

**Special events:**

An entertainment stage, giant TV and barbecue pit at the back of the pier for special events and private parties.

to Times Square.

Despite Galveston's history with severe tropical weather, the threat of another hurricane doesn't seem to bother Fertitta, known as a bold businessman who has accumulated a vast assortment of restaurants, hotels, gaming and entertainment venues that took in around \$2 billion last year.

"Doesn't even faze me," he said. "The best developments in the U.S. are on the waterfront. That's why you pay high insurance premiums, and you just don't worry about it."

**Filling a void**

The Pleasure Pier should boost tourism on the Seawall and encourage visitors to extend their stays in Galveston, Mayor Joe Jaworski said.

Fertitta said it will fit with existing attractions such as the beach, Moody Gardens, The Strand shopping district and Schlitterbahn water park.

John Gerner, managing director of Leisure Business Advisors, a theme park consulting firm in Richmond, Va., sees the

Pleasure Pier as poised to thrive.

The closing of Houston's regional theme park, Astroworld, created a void in the area for amusement parks, Gerner said. The Landry's-owned Kemah Boardwalk filled some of that void, he said, and so will the Pleasure Pier.

"Landry's is very well regarded in the leisure industry," he noted.

Schlitterbahn and Pleasure Pier will likely complement each other and help make Galveston more of a destination, Gerner suggested.

Fertitta owns the pier and several blocks on the other side of Seawall Boulevard that will be used for parking and retail. His Fish Tales restaurant is already open there.

**Boardwalk memories**

At his Houston headquarters a few days ago, Fertitta had on blue jeans and a button-down, untucked Lacoste shirt while munching on sticks of diet cheese. He recalled living in an apartment near the pier when he was very young, and working at the Flagship as a teenager.

"The Flagship was a magnet for out-of-town girls," he said, "so that's where I made sure I was."

Asked if the Pleasure Pier might draw business from the well-established Kemah Boardwalk, Fertitta said he expects people will go to the boardwalk on some days and other days they'll visit the pier.

What it's about, he said, is giving people more to do in Galveston County.

Last May, island residents voted to charge for parking on the Seawall to pay for landscaping, lighting, safety features, bathrooms and other improvements, Jaworski said.

Fertitta has not asked for any tax breaks or other incentives from the city, the mayor said.

Fertitta is heavily invested in Galveston. He owns Seawall Boulevard property between 50th and 57th Street and

operations on that stretch, including the San Luis Resort, Rainforest Cafe, Hilton and Holiday Inn hotels and Landry's Seafood House.

Jaworski said Fertitta's newest project will help Galveston as it continues to rebound from Hurricane Ike 3½ years ago. Last summer's tourist season was the city's second-best ever, based on hotel occupancy, he noted.

"The Flagship Hotel was a show of strength after Hurricane Carla," Jaworski said.

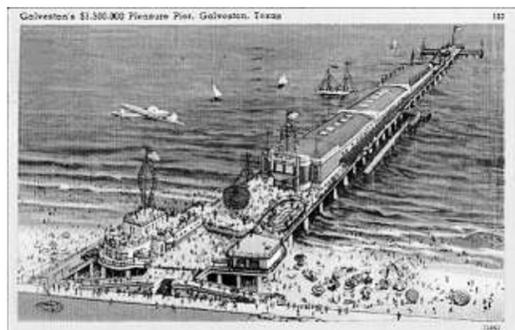
Likewise, he added, the new Pleasure Pier will attest to the city's post-Ike vitality.

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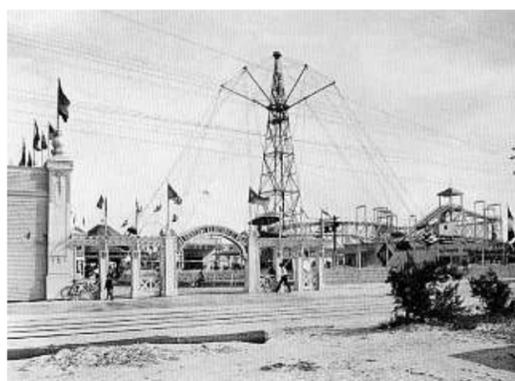
Galveston County Historical Museum

Near 25th Street and Seawall, Electric Park was once the epicenter for Galveston tourism. Built in 1906, it was supplanted by the first Pleasure Pier in 1943.



Rosenberg Library Galveston

A vintage postcard depicts the original Pleasure Pier, which drew throngs with rides, arcades, an aquarium, and a fishing pier. Now a new Pleasure Pier is going up at the same location.



Galveston County Historical Museum

The Electric Park, which occupied an area near the Seawall and 25th Street, featured vaudeville shows, rides, a restaurant and a man covered in tattoos.

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Thomas B. Shea

The mild weather that drew joggers to the Seawall has been a boon to construction on the new Pleasure Pier, which replaces the Flagship Hotel in Galveston.