



Shrine expected to open in summer

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ST. JOHN | What once was a field as anonymous as any other patch of land in town is nearly shaped into its new purpose, a religious experience.

The Shrine of Christ's Passion is expected to open in June.

The shrine will feature life-size bronze statues depicting the Stations of the Cross and four other religious scenes. People will travel from station to station, each with an audio reflection recorded by broadcaster Bill Kurtis.

Set along the west side of U.S. 41 about a mile south of 93rd Avenue, the shrine already is drawing widespread attention.

"We're drawing people from distances," said Paul Anderson, visitor center and store manager. "They're coming to see what it's all about."

At a recent trade show for tour operators, Anderson had 30 appointments to talk about the prayer trail. And although most of the companies are planning trips for 2009, the St. John project has their attention.

"They are so enthused about this project that they will try to book tours for this summer, even though it is late in the planning season," Anderson said. "They're just amazed at what this project is. They're looking for new things. This is definitely something new and unique."

The shrine's gift shop and visitor center opened in December, but bad weather has delayed construction on the trail this year.

The majority of the wiring for the sound and lighting is done, and crews can finish the work when the cold weather breaks. The landscaping, designed to have an arid feel as in Jesus' day, is nearly complete, Anderson said.

Just north of the gift shop will be the Sanctity of Life Shrine, a 20-by-20-foot area anchored by a black granite tombstone and a statue of a weeping Jesus with a baby in his hands.

North of that is the Marian Wayside Shrine, a fixture along U.S. 41 since the 1950s.

The Shrine of Christ's Passion is an undertaking seven years in the making, Anderson said.

An artist out of Amarillo, Texas, sculpted all of the statues. Two of the bronze statues in Pilate's court have been installed. Twenty-six of them are in storage locally, and the rest are either being finished or waiting to be transported to St. John.

Anderson said he expects the rest of the statues will be installed at the end of April or first part of May.

The shrine is expected to draw people from all over the country and even internationally. Anderson said he heard talk of hotels being planned in St. John.

But St. John Town Manager Steve Kil said there's no truth to rumors that hotels are in the works near the shrine.

"I have yet to receive any confirmation regarding the construction of a hotel," Kil said. "I certainly think that the project is piquing some interest in the hotel industry, but I have not had anyone approach me about the construction of a hotel."

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