

play *"The Operators' Choice"* METER



Contributing Writers, Frank Seninsky and Tracy Sarris

A fun "zone" for kids in Montana



Amber Collier turned a dream into a reality when she opened an FEC in rural Montana.

When Amber Collier was asked "Why The Zone?" "Why now?" her answer was very simple, "because it was needed."

After moving to Flathead Valley, Mont., in 2001, Collier became aware of the need for some kind of year-round family entertainment center (FEC) where locals could hang out, hold birthday parties, or celebrate other events.

At the time, Collier was very busy with her own successful career as a real estate broker, being a mother of two (Cheyanne age 9 and Ryla age 3) and assisting her husband, Robin, with his business, Meadow Creek

Antler Company. It wasn't until the real estate market took a nosedive as a result of the recent economic recession that Amber revisited her idea to build a fun, affordable, and safe place for kids and families.

After speaking with her local Small Business Development Center, Collier realized if someone else could start a business like this, she could too, and her dream grew into a vision. With the support of family and friends, she began a year-long process of research and development that eventually turned that vision into a 37-page business plan.

Collier had done her homework,

but even with a detailed, well defined business plan, trying to get funding for a large scale project like The Zone Family Fun Center, was a whole new challenge. The country was in the middle of a recession and most of the banks in Flathead rejected her request for start-up funding. Start-up costs were estimated to be just under \$863,000 plus a \$100,000 line of credit to cover contingencies and unexpected operating costs.

Eventually, the Montana West Economic Development, a private, non-profit organization, and a handful of private investors provided the funds needed to move the project forward.



“Lazer Combat,” The Zone’s 3,500-square-foot urban themed lazer combat arena.

Collier said, “You can’t take ‘no’ for an answer. We were turned down so many times, but we didn’t give up. We just had to think outside the box.”

THE BUSINESS PLAN

For anyone who has started a new business, the start-up plan can be your key to success. It can tell you whether or not there is a business worth pursuing and includes components such as descriptions of the company, product or service, market, forecasts, management team, and financial analysis.

Collier’s experience in starting up small businesses helped her to recognize the need to be thorough. She utilized her time by visiting new and established FEC’s, attending a variety of industry specific educational events, including a week of classes during the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) Expo, to learn as much about the Family Entertainment business as possible, and collecting market research information to validate her plan.

But even armed with a good amount of material, Collier knew that she still needed some assistance to bring it all together. After several months of interviewing and talking with consultants all over the world, she decided

to hire Frank Seninsky, President of Amusement Entertainment Management (AEM), to review her business plan and put it in a form that is acceptable to lenders and to provide entertainment consulting services.

Collier recently advised another FEC “dreamer” that one of the best decisions she made was to hire a consultant. “It was a difficult decision, but worth every dime spent,” said Collier. “I wouldn’t recommend anyone going into the business without a good consultant who knows the industry.” Interestingly, Amber decided to go with AEM because “Frank was brutally honest about what was good and bad about my business plan.” While all the other consultants were telling her how great her plan was and how many millions she would make, Frank told her the truth. “This was the guy I needed on my team,” said Collier.

She knew that, in the long run, this would save her much more money than what it would cost for the services. They worked together to restructure the business plan so it made sense. Frank convinced Amber to do the project in three phases starting with not using 6,000 sq. ft. of the 24,000 sq. ft. so that The Zone was right-sized for the market and could

grow once it was properly marketed to the tourists.

Seninsky also helped her pick out the best mix of attractions, decide where they should be positioned, and how they should be marketed. He also chipped away at Collier’s original budget and found ways to cut back about \$250,000.

Seninsky took a very special interest in this project. “Amber is one of those rare individuals who jumps in, gets their hands dirty, and gets the job done. She painted the huge logo and design on the side of the building that everyone can see as they drive by. It stands out so it can be easily seen by the passengers flying into the Kalispell Airport,” said Seninsky “The airport staff heard about The Zone from the pilots.”

Seninsky continued, “Some of the things Amber did to bring this project in under budget were: renting a truck and driving to Canada to pick up the used kitchen equipment for the snack bar that she purchased for \$15,000; renting a concrete floor trencher after I told her she needed to run the electric and data lines in parallel pipes 6” deep for the game outlets (I told her to call me to let me know that she didn’t lose any of her toes as using a trencher could be dangerous, since I



The Zone's 'Krazy Zone' featuring a Prime Play Ballocity System that Collier installed herself.

shape and ready to open by December 18, 2010.

Seninsky said, "Not all of the games or attractions were on site for the initial opening because there simply wasn't enough money left over to pay for this. Amber was up front about this with her guests and she kept her word that the initial profits would be poured back into filling up the space. Every couple of weeks one or two new games and other amenities were added and the customers actually looked forward to these additions."

The Zone opened with a used 60-kid capacity Ballocity System by Prime Play as the anchor attraction, a used 3,500 sq. ft. laser tag arena that was equipped by Delta Strike and themed by Creative Works, a Lazer Frenzy by Creative Works, a 30-game arcade and redemption center with an Intercard Debit Card System, a set of used bumper cars (RDC), an inflatable bounce house, castle and 18 ft. inflatable slide (Jumpions) that can become an outdoor water slide during the summer, and a snack bar featuring hand-tossed pizzas, chicken wings, salads and wraps.

Although projected attendance during the summer tourist season may be coming in a little lower than initially anticipated, Collier reported that expenses have been lower as well so she feels the facility may actually exceed the projected net income for the first year.



already knew that she would do the trenching herself no matter what I advised her.); learning how to install debit card readers and to fix games; installing the Ballocity attraction herself and using different colored swimming noodles for padding on the poles, saving \$20,000+ on the install costs. I could go on and on but you get the picture that Amber is 'hands-on'."

DREAMS BECOME REALITY

By August 2010, Collier was able to choose a 24,000-square-foot rental building based on the building/land being large enough to handle all of the planned attractions as well as potential future expansion. It had adequate parking and was accessible and centrally located.

Having found the building, Collier and her team of two began a five month-long remodel and, due to the hard work and long hours by Kramer Enterprises, a commercial general contractor, they got the building in

She has already reinvested some of the profits into more games and a four-lane early model Rollerball mini-bowling (US Bowling) that she found "used" in New Jersey and is having Alpha-Omega Sales ship to her.

She noted that they are currently looking at utilizing their remaining 6,000-square-feet. to add a day camp for preschoolers and young school-aged children.

She felt that a day camp could provide a much-needed service to the community and their original plans for a black-light mini golf course could wait. The day camp could provide activities and programs for the children with an occasional 'field trip' to the fun center.

MARKETING & MORE

Marketing of The Zone has been limited to word of mouth and social

networking at this point. “We have a growing group of followers on Facebook and we use this as a tool to generate buzz and provide coupons and specials,” said Collier.

“We have also been able to give back to the community through sponsoring activities and events for various organizations and non-profits.”

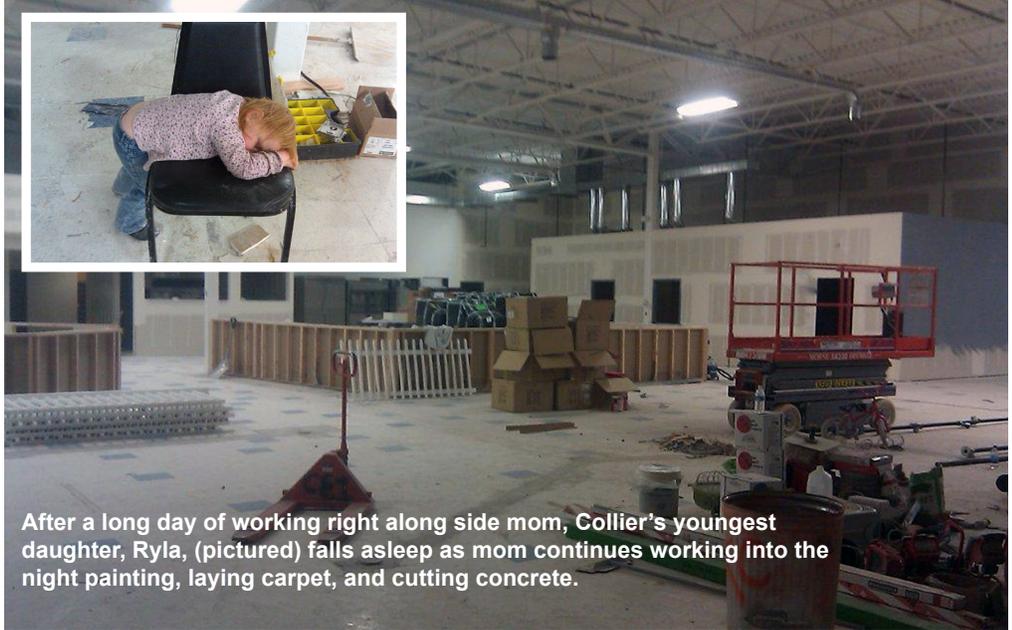
Future plans include placing brochures in the nearby Glacier National Park hotels, but for now the locals have been quick to share information about The Zone with visiting tourists. Glacier National park, located only 31 miles away, draws over two million visitors per year, many of whom travel past The Zone to get to the park.

The Zone has been open for just over seven months now and business is doing well and on pace to hit the conservative range of the business plan projections. Like any new business, there were some challenges to overcome.

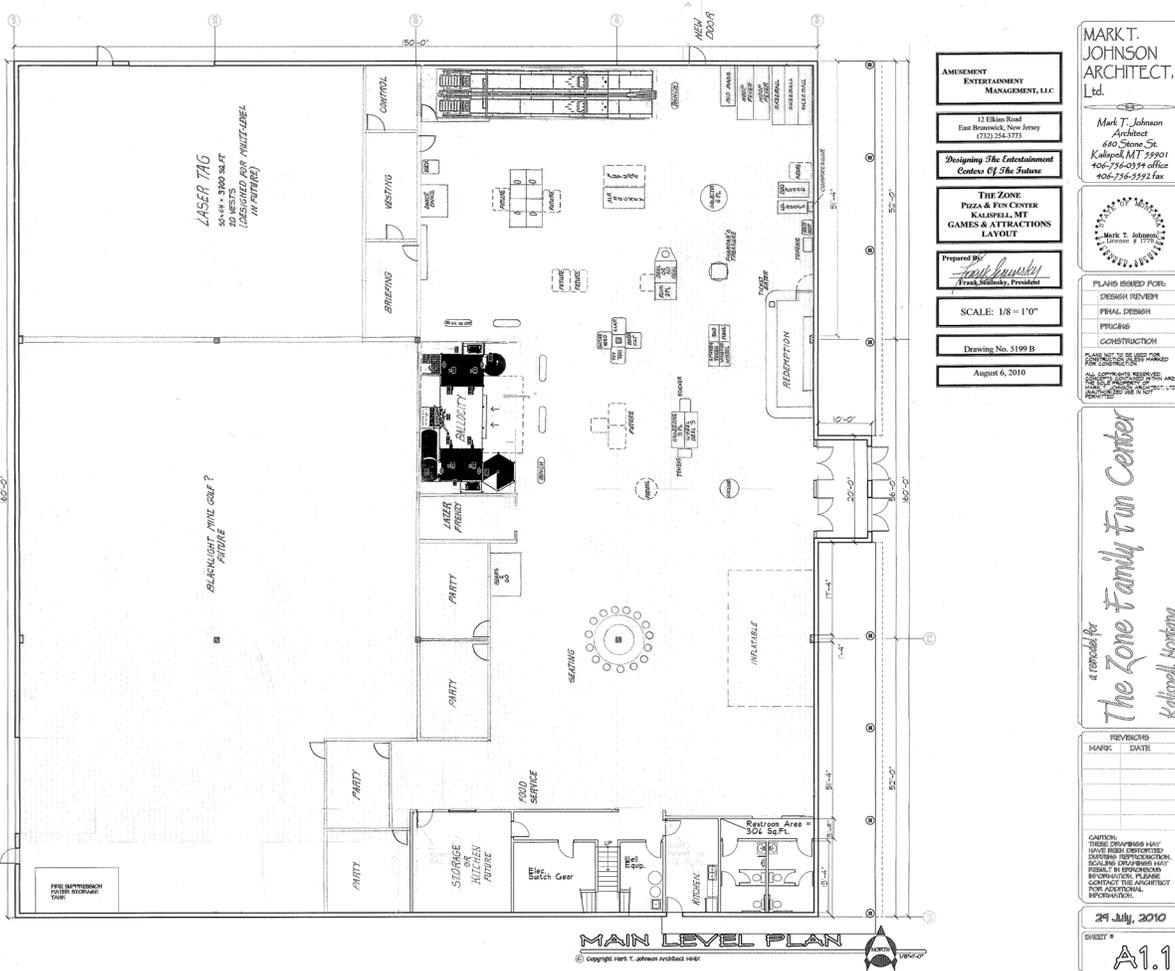
“Labor and food costs can easily get out of control and you constantly need to be monitoring the business to make improvements,” Collier explained. “The biggest challenge I have had to deal with is the labor and all the drama that can come with that. The first time I had to let someone go

was very difficult for me. We are a team and we all share the same vision and goals, but sometimes tough decisions have to be made.”

It should also be noted that although Kalispell is the second fastest growing city in Montana, according to 2009 census information, the pop-



After a long day of working right along side mom, Collier's youngest daughter, Ryla, (pictured) falls asleep as mom continues working into the night painting, laying carpet, and cutting concrete.



The Zone Games & Attractions Layout

ulation is just exceeding 20,000 with the county's total population being just over 86,844.

The highest surrounding county's population (Lake County) is still under 29,000. Considering that The Zone is pretty much located in the 'middle of nowhere' with a relatively small population, Collier has been very successful in attracting repeat customers.

Seninsky commented, "This is the best repeat customer rate I have seen in a long time."

Collier added "This is a great industry and I absolutely love this business. I am like a big kid myself and love to be on the floor, not tucked away in a back office. The staff and I interact with the guests and have as much fun playing the games and attractions as

they do. It requires long hours and, as an owner, you need to be involved in every aspect of the business. It is a lot of fun and very rewarding when you can see all the joy it brings to the children and families who visit."

For more information about The Zone go to www.zonefamilyfun.com or call 406-755-9663.



Frank Seninsky is president of the Alpha-Omega Group of companies, which includes a consulting agency, Amusement Entertainment Management (AEM), two nationwide revenue sharing equipment suppliers, Alpha-Omega Amusements, Inc. and Alpha-BET Entertainment, and Alpha-Omega Sales, a full line game & related equipment distributor. All are headquartered in East Brunswick, New Jersey. During his 44 years in the leisure entertainment industry, Seninsky has

presented nearly 400 seminars and penned more than 1500 articles. His columns regularly appear in Tourist Attractions & Parks, RePlay, Vending Times, and Bowling Center Management. Frank is co-regent for Foundations Entertainment University, which presents multiple-day sessions in the US and in growing markets including Russia, Ukraine, Dubai, UK, and potentially Asia, India, and Africa as well. His world famous 'The Redemption & FEC Report' e-newsletter goes out to more than 42,000 readers worldwide. Alpha-Omega Sales is the exclusive US Distributor for all Comfyland Edutainment Center products and the new exclusive distributor for GameALERT. To contact Frank directly, email him at fseninsky@aol.com or call 732-616-5345.

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Amusement Entertainment Management, LLC is a worldwide industry consulting group specializing in the feasibility, design, layout and operation of Family Entertainment Centers and Leisure-Based Entertainment venues.

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