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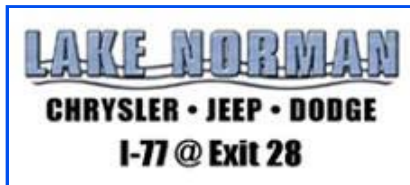
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2008

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*Concord: Branding around motorsports*

## Exit 49 in Cabarrus expected to grow in international status

By Dave Yochum

Concord tourism officials are talking about Exit 49 blossoming into a major tourist destination, complete with a variety of tourist attractions and hotels for every budget.

Attractions like the zMAX Drag Strip, Lowe's Motor Speedway, the Concord Mills shopping center and the soon-to-open Great Wolf Lodge indoor water park provide the kind of local foundation that make for a national destination on the order of Branson, Mo. and Nashville, Tenn.

By some accounts, Concord Mills is the state's No. 1 tourist destination, ahead of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Moreover, thinking internationally is hardly a stretch for Cabarrus County, says DeSales Wagster, executive director of the Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"When you put all those elements together it does create a true destination for tourism. You have the amenities, the attractions, the hotels and the services. Yes, you have a true tourism destination," says Wagster, who oversees a budget on the order of \$2.6 million, up from \$1 million a year ago. The Cabarrus hotel tax also rose from 5 percent last year to 6 percent this year.

With Great Wolf, plus other hotels opening, she anticipates her budget climbing to the \$4 million range next year. She is already planning more emphasis on international marketing, as NASCAR gains popularity in Europe.

No less than Bruton Smith, the billionaire who developed Lowe's Motor Speedway and the zMAX Drag Strip at the eastern end of the Exit 49 area, calls this the world's top auto racing destination.

It's important to be able to brand a destination around a particular subject, so that when visitors consider a trip, they know they are going to the capital of a certain industry, like Los Angeles is to filmmaking and Nashville is to country music.

With motorsports as a common theme or brand, similar tourism-related investments at Exit 49 have a leg up. There is an immediate relationship

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between the travel consumer and the destination.

"When I think of destinations such as Branson, Nashville, Pigeon Forge, they all have something that is very notable. I think we all have that ingredient in Cabarrus and that is racing," Wagster said.

Hotelier Doug Stafford said there is "no doubt having Lowe's Motor Speedway a mile from your front door is a good thing." He said there will be ongoing activity at the zMAX drag-way, as well as the September nationals. Along with car shows at the speedway, driving schools and the drag-way, there will be an ongoing flow of tourist activity to bring business to hotels, restaurants and various attractions.

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