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By Jeffrey Miller
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From Huntington Beach

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"To me, the most exciting (thing) is to walk along the pier at night, listen to the sound of a baseball game in extra innings, smell people catching fish, see couples holding hands," said Verona, who is better known by his biker nickname, Jinx.

"Wherever you go in New England, you have your village green where everything surrounds it. In Boston, it's called the common. Here we call it the pier."

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Landmark pier to come alive again

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It's the longest Huntington Beach has gone without its landmark. In a town that has pinned the success of a half-billion-dollar downtown redevelopment project on the pier, the opening of the new pier comes as a relief to many.

Pier almost ready

The new and improved Huntington Beach pier opens Saturday at a cost of $10.8 million and after almost two years of construction. Unlike the other piers in Orange County, which are wooden, the Huntington Beach pier is concrete and required 5,400 yards of concrete for the deck alone. 912 pilings were used to support the structure.

The city must raise $1.3 million for the restaurant and snack shops. They are not expected to open until 1994.
PIER: Huntington Beach landmark to reopen with celebration

FORMERLY known as "Surf City," the $10.8 million pier is more than just a long slab of concrete on stilts. "This town revolves around that pier," said Diane Baker, president of the Huntington Beach Conference and Visitors Bureau, which has mounted a fervent campaign to market Huntington Beach as Surf City. "It's a real draw to Huntington Beach, and people have really missed it."

"It's not the final piece of the puzzle, but it's the biggest piece of the puzzle," said Paul Cook, former city administrator and chairman of the Pierfest '92 committee. "For the redevelopment to be successful, the pier has to be there and be open."

Although downtown Huntington Beach is regaining its landmark, the image of its Main Street has changed considerably since the pier closed four years ago.

"You still have the same bikinis, the same changes in the mass and the scale and the familiarity," she said. "What has changed is the main pier, Phase II, a lot of its character," he said. "That's what made the pier unique! Huntington Beach. It wasn't like Newport. It wasn't like Laguna. It was a city built on surfing. But I don't want to sound too negative. I really do like it here. And it's still a great place to surf."

For civic leaders, business owners and residents, the reopening of the pier is a giant step toward the economic and spiritual rejuvenation of downtown Huntington Beach. "It's not the final piece of the puzzle, but it's the biggest piece of the puzzle," said Paul Cook, former administrator and chairman of the Pierfest '92 committee. "For the redevelopment to be successful, the pier has to be there and be open."

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"Although downtown is certainly an improvement, it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, the village concept we thought we were buying into."

Dave Sullivan, president, Huntington Beach Tomorrow

is trying to woo better-heeled visitors.

Wooden buildings with peeling paint have given way to pastel stucco. Instead of rowdy bars, liquor stores and head shops, civic leaders seek to encourage "visitor-serving commercial outlets."

"It really has been an opportunity to add character to the town," said Deputy City Administrator Rich Barnard. "It's given people many more options, things they can do when they go down there."

Still, some residents complain that in its zest to promote itself as Surf City, while wiping out its grungy, beach-town past, the city cent arrivals, memories of old Huntington Beach hold little appeal.

"It was scary — it was like LA," recalled Katy Burnett, 16, as she balanced precariously on her inline skates while eating a snow cone on the beach walk under the pier. "I wouldn't come down here before Pierside (Pavillion) went up. My parents thought it was too dangerous."

Her friend Jack Campbell, 18, also believes downtown is looking much spiffier, but doubted that Main Street will become a commercial mecca.

"The quality of Huntington Beach is the pier, the beach and the waves," he said. "Anybody who looks any farther than that is blind. If you come here from out of town, (the beach) is what you come for. If you want to go shopping, you go down to Fashion Island or to South Coast Plaza."

Greg Ostron leaned against the railing on the pier head one hot afternoon last week and looked out at the surf. Ostron, 32, had first seen the beach and pier while on vacation from Arizona as a child. He had resolved then to live in Huntington Beach some day. He has for the past five years. As the pier opens, he is filled with mixed emotions.

"It seems like downtown has lost