

Editorial: Preparation needed as bourbon boom rolls

By *The Kentucky Standard* Editorial Board

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Last week's announcement by the Stoli Group to build its new Kentucky Owl Park facility on the 420 acres that now hosts the Cedar Creek Quarry represents something of a gauntlet being thrown down for the city of Bardstown and its growing bourbon tourism industry.

It's fantastic news, but the question is, are we ready to handle it?

In case you missed the story in Friday's edition of *The Kentucky Standard*, the Stoli Group — known best for Stolichnaya Vodka among the many labels in its global spirits portfolio — is planning for what amounts to a distillery/amusement park/resort park on the quarry site. After the company purchased the super-premium Kentucky Owl label from the Dedman family in Harrodsburg, Stoli Group sought out a place to begin distilling their own bourbon under the label. (Kentucky Owl sources high-end bourbons from other distilleries for its highly sought-after blend.)

Like many others in recent years, they chose the Bourbon Capital of the World as the home of their distillery and entertainment complex, to the tune of a potential \$150 million investment. The company plans to fill in the quarry to make a lake on all sides of the distillery, and the site will also feature a visitor's center, gourmet restaurant, a much-needed convention center, and a depot stop for R.J. Corman's Old Kentucky Dinner Train. Other features will include bottling and rickhouse facilities, a concert hall, art gallery, boat docks and hotel, retail and office space. It's welcome news for a spot in Bardstown that is near its end of life as a working rock quarry, as are the new jobs it will bring — 57 in the early stages and as many as 300 down the road, not to mention the construction jobs in building the facility.

Other new distillery facilities in production — Bardstown Bourbon Company and Lux Row, for example — are planning new twists on the traditional distillery tour experience, enhancements designed to keep visitors on the premises longer than just the 60- to 90-minute tour/gift shop visit that most people are used to.

"Our vision is to make it a bourbon destination," said Dmitry Efimov, the CEO of Kentucky Owl Bourbon.

With the announcement of Kentucky Owl Park's massive development, things just got real for the city of Bardstown, and we need to be ready for what will come along with that.

Each year, more and more people find their way to Bardstown to visit. One of the most common complaints is inadequate parking downtown. Our downtown area often serves as a staging area for tourists planning out their busy day of shopping, eating and tourism sights to see. With three more distilleries set to open to the public over the next three years, this creates that many more options to draw people in to Bardstown.

Perhaps this would be a good time for the city to consider beefing up its available parking options. With nowhere for the current city lots to grow out to, growing up is the only option. A three-story parking garage would be welcomed on the current lot bordering Mulberry Alley and Flaget Street to alleviate the regular parking crunch during the summertime peak tourist season. Designers could come up with facades for the structure that would fit within the historic district's requirements. We shouldn't wait long to get that process in motion, because the next tourism season is right around the corner.

Lodging is also a concern, as most of Bardstown's visitors are day-trippers from outside the county. Having a hotel on-site at Kentucky Owl Park will help, but that will likely come in a later stage of development on the site. We need those rooms now so we can keep guests staying overnight in Nelson County and not driving in from Elizabethtown, Shepherdsville, Louisville or Lexington. It is imperative for us to recapture those lodging dollars, and we urge more entrepreneurs to invest in this area.

These are heady times in Bardstown and Nelson County as the bourbon boom shows no signs of slowing down. We need to be prepared for the changing tourism landscape, because people will keep coming. We must be forward-thinking on how we handle the growing number of visitors each year, because that will have a lot to do with how many of those people keep coming back or encourage their family and friends to make the trip.