How We Plan To Make Gulf State Park a Family-Friendly, Nature-Based Destination We Can Be Proud Of

By Barnett Lawley, Commissioner
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The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) and Auburn University (AU) propose building a nature-based family destination that includes a hotel and conference center at Gulf State Park. It will be one of the best things to ever happen to the Gulf Shores community that was hit hard by Hurricane Ivan and will also help fund the other 21 state parks in Alabama.

A 2001 feasibility study by the Strategic Advisory Group concludes that the proposed 350-room hotel and conference center will provide meeting space for up to 2,000 people and attract convention dollars that are currently leaving Alabama for Destin. This new facility is expected to pump up to $65 million a year into the Gulf Shores area economy and produce nearly $3 million a year in tax revenue for local Alabama schools, roads and other vital services. It will also generate 1,600 new jobs along Alabama’s Gulf Coast, over 400 of which will be at the new hotel.

The Gulf State Park Hotel and Conference Center will provide quality accommodations at competitive prices. Tourism will increase. Convention business will increase. Other hotels in Gulf Shores will benefit because we can’t fit 2,000 conventioneers in a 350-room hotel. Local and state revenues will increase without raising taxes.

The new hotel will be larger than the old 144-room facility, but will occupy a smaller footprint within the state park. The result: more public access to beautiful, clean beaches with less environmental intrusion.

Kayaking, fishing and hiking will be available at the new Gulf State Park. Also included in the plan: Auburn University students working in the hotel and convention center and gaining valuable experience in the hospitality industry.

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We plan to emulate the successful academic/business partnership between the City of
Auburn and Auburn University Hotel and Conference Center. In the future, there will be potential opportunities for Auburn partnerships in areas such as marine science, biology, business, turf management, forestry and wildlife, and ecotourism.

ADCNR will lease the Gulf State Park land to AU who will then hire a developer to build the hotel and conference center. No transfer of ownership will occur. Alabama Attorney General Troy King ruled that the arrangement is constitutional and complies with state law. Governor Riley endorses the plan. A lawsuit was filed at his request to ensure the legality of the plan.

Seven developers are currently competing to build the new facility. AU is reviewing developers and will ask for design proposals from a finalized list of candidates.

Some have raised concerns that the planned hotel is too expensive for the average Alabamian and a bad use of park land. Here are the facts:

- The proposed hotel will have competitive room rates. No hotel can afford to price itself too high; otherwise, rooms stay empty.
- Since 1999 the profit at Gulf State Park Lodge has shown a dramatic decrease each year. For the last five years, the Gulf State Park Lodge has lost a total of 3.78 million dollars.
- We have a responsibility to the people of Alabama to make sure the new hotel and conference center at Gulf State Park is profitable. Otherwise, it cannot support the other parks that are subsidized by Gulf State Park revenues.
- Privatization of the land will not occur. The land is deeded to the state of Alabama and not to the State Parks division. The land will be operated in conjunction with Gulf State Park, but is not State Park property. That part of the development is not using proceeds of a bond issue.

Gulf State Park is a 6,158-acre site with over three miles of beachfront for everyone to enjoy. By the end of this year, the park will offer 496 campsites to the public, including hundreds to accommodate larger, late-model RVs. One hundred campsites are already open at prices ranging from $23 to $30. By January of 2006, 30 cabins will be available for rent as well as a 10,000-square-foot beach pavilion with multipurpose educational and special events areas. The average Alabamian will be able to afford and enjoy the entire lodging experience at Gulf State Park.

Hurricane Ivan did tens of millions of dollars in damage to Gulf State Park. Businesses lost millions in revenue. The planned improvements will give Gulf Shores an economic shot in the arm. We have the opportunity to create something we can all be proud of. We have a great plan. We need to make it happen.

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