State park project will be an economic boost
Thursday, April 28, 2005

At a time when seemingly every inch of available waterfront property is being bought up for high-rise condominiums, it's understandable that some Baldwin Countians might be leery of the proposed four-star hotel and convention center at Gulf State Park.

They needn't be. The proposal from Gov. Bob Riley and Conservation Commissioner Barnett Lawley is intended to promote the economy of south Baldwin County and to market the park as a destination for both eco-tourists and the ordinary Alabamian who just wants to go to the beach.

Unique and invaluable:

With 350 hotel rooms and an exhibition hall, the project will attract conventions to Pleasure Island that now go to Destin, Fla., and Biloxi, Miss. It will also enhance the natural elements that make Gulf State Park unique and invaluable.

The resultant increase in visitors -- whether they come to bird-watch, see the wonders of the park's maritime forest or simply attend a meeting -- will boost the local economy and, ultimately, the entire state parks system.

Historically, some south Baldwin residents have opposed letting private developers into the public park, fearing both commercialization and state-supported competition for local businesses.

But the Riley administration's proposal addresses those concerns by ensuring that the state has plenty of control over the project.

And there's no question that something needs to be done quickly to help the park. Hurricane Ivan essentially started the demolition work on the existing beachfront lodge, which locals and state officials alike agree was dilapidated and outdated anyway.

Besides, Gulf State Park -- which generates revenue to support the whole state parks system -- was losing hundreds of thousands of dollars annually even before last year's hurricane.

Meanwhile, Alabama is losing coastal convention business to the Destin area and the casino-laden Mississippi Gulf Coast.

While being large enough to accommodate big meetings and conventions, the size of the complex will not overwhelm existing hotels and resorts in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach and on the Fort Morgan peninsula.

The convention center will be built with insurance proceeds from last year's hurricane damage to Gulf State Park. For the hotel, state officials will lease land to Auburn University, which in turn will solicit bids for its construction and operation.

The result will be a complex similar to the hotel and conference center adjacent to the Auburn campus, operated by the West Paces group, where students get hands-on training for future careers in the hospitality industry.

The new hotel in Gulf State Park will be set farther back from the beach than the ill-fated existing lodge and will take up less space, freeing up more of the beach.
While room rates will be higher than at the old lodge, Gov. Riley and Commissioner Lawley say Alabamians seeking less expensive lodging at the public state park still can rent lower-priced cabins on Lake Shelby, where more cabins are on the drawing board.

Overall, the project will enhance Gulf State Park's appeal to eco-tourists who seek to watch birds, learn about wetlands and otherwise experience nature.

Meanwhile, students from Auburn and other universities will be able to work and study at the park, and beach-goers will find the shoreline even more open and accessible to the public.

Legal objections raised by opponents of the project have been answered by a recent attorney general's opinion that clears the project.

The Riley administration can help allay their concerns by insisting, for starters, on the best-possible price for leasing its property. Land prices have risen higher than Ivan's storm surge for any scrap of land on any waterfront in Baldwin County.

No connector road:

State leaders can also reassure people that they will not allow a new north-south road to be built through Gulf State Park, connecting the beach highway (Alabama 182) to Canal Road (Alabama 180).

Some local politicians are pushing the idea, presumably because of the explosion of development planned for Canal Road, at the base of the Beach Express toll bridge and north on the Beach Express.

Not only would such a road do irreparable environmental damage to the maritime forest and wetlands in the park, but it also would negate the very attributes that make Gulf State Park a potential "hot spot" for eco-tourism.

If developers want better beach access and municipal leaders want better traffic flow, they can donate or acquire privately owned land outside the park.

Gulf State Park is a gem that belongs to all Alabamians. If built and operated responsibly, as the governor proposes, the new hotel and convention center will enhance and protect the park for generations to come.