

MOBILE REGISTER

Facts show why park needs hotel complex

Sunday, June 26, 2005

ANY DOUBTS that Pleasure Island wants the hotel and convention center proposed for Gulf State Park should have been cleared up by a town hall meeting last week in Gulf Shores.

Sure, the project still has opponents, but a large majority of people who spoke up at the standing-room-only meeting favor the plan to let Auburn University go into partnership with a private developer to build the hotel, enhance the natural attractions of the park and educate students in subjects ranging from hospitality to marine science.

Those in favor included business people, tourism officials, people who are forced to hold conventions somewhere else because of lack of facilities, local elected officials and several state legislators. The enthusiasm for the project is a notable change from years past when former Govs. Fob James and Don Siegelman floated the idea of a private developer getting involved with the park.

The meeting, sponsored by local chambers of commerce and featuring members of the administration of Gov. Bob Riley, was an example of how democracy ought to work. Open dialogue with the people directly affected by such a project can go a long way toward explaining what's happening and dispelling rumors.

For example, it should not have been necessary for state officials to declare several times that there would be no casino at the park, but apparently some people have heard a strong enough rumor that they needed reassurance on that point.

The audience gave a warm reception to a pledge by Toby Roth, Gov. Riley's chief of staff, that the governor will push legislation prohibiting the future sale or lease of the Gulf State Park beachfront east of the hotel and convention center. Moreover, the new facilities will be set much farther back from the beach than the old hotel rooms.

Mr. Roth said the governor is prepared to issue an executive order to that effect until legislation can be introduced in the next regular session. Preserving the Gulf State Park beach becomes even more important with the explosion of waterfront development since Hurricane Ivan last year.

Baldwin County's legislative delegation should get behind the preservation bill. The proposal should allay fears by some opponents that the hotel and convention center would lead to more beachfront development to the detriment of Gulf State Park's unique open space and public accessibility to it.

The project still faces legal review in a court of law, and much negotiating remains on how the partnership with Auburn will work and who will build and operate the hotel. The Riley administration should continue to be as open as possible with the public about the details of the project, to ensure that the facts are presented and that questions are answered.

However, it seems clear that the majority of people most affected by the project -- those who live and work on Pleasure Island -- recognize its value, economically and environmentally, to Alabama's Gulf Coast. The Riley plan will enhance the natural attractions of the park and provide an economic boost to the region. It deserves the area's support.