

TALLADEGA DAILY HOME

Gulf park needs green light

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An attorney general's opinion is in, saying it's OK to proceed with a planned project at the hurricane wrecked Gulf State Park, and it's time to move ahead.

But a group billing itself as Save Our Alabama Parks is vowing to continue the fight.

What the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has proposed is an innovative way to rebuild and restore a gem on Alabama's Gulf Coast. By forging a partnership with a private developer, Auburn University and the state, the park could return better than when it was thriving long ago.

Years of neglect took its toll on the lodge and the park. Hurricane Ivan offered the knock-out punch. And Alabama is wasting precious time while an opposing group uses legal maneuvering to stop the rebuilding project from moving forward.

What is planned on the site is a new hotel to replace the lodge, which features additional beach front access for the public. It also preserves natural areas of the park.

The contentious part of the plan is that it calls for Auburn to run the hotel facility through its hotel-restaurant management program. And the project can also be used to teach students in areas of forestry, wildlife and marine biology.

The opposition had cited a 1998 constitutional amendment that it says prohibited any group other than the state parks agency from operating facilities.

But Attorney General Troy King's office says the proposal is constitutionally sound.

The rental and royalties earned from the project will go to fund other state parks, the opportunities for students to get hands-on training are plentiful, and the public finally gets a hotel, conference center and park it can look to with pride.

Gulf Shores has long been in need of additional gulf front convention facilities and when the plan was first proposed, it looked like a win-win-win for the state conservation department, education and the public.

Despite the opposition, it still does.