

Master plan unveiled for Gulf State Park enhancements

By: **ERIC MANN** | February 3, 2016

Gulf Shores Mayor Robert Craft hopes a revitalized Gulf State Park and rebuilt lodge will not only rehabilitate the coastal environment, but also show visitors a side of the state he says many outsiders don't know exists.

"Some people don't even know Alabama has a beach," Craft said. "I think there's kind of a negative perception of Alabama out there in some circles. This project will attract people to our coastal cities and we will get to show them the Alabama we all know and love. I think the biggest benefit of the project is that it will improve the state's image, person by person."

Despite a federal lawsuit filed by an environmental group against the use of BP restoration funds for the lodge and conference center, state park officials and designers from Boston-based Sasaki Associates unveiled a master plan for the park's multi-year renovation last week in Orange Beach.

OVERVIEW

Master Plan Elements



(Courtesy of Sasaki Associates) state officials last week detailed the \$85.5 million enhancement proposal at Gulf State Park.

The restoration project is funded with \$85.5 million in early restoration money from the National Resources Damage Assessment process. The project's centerpiece will be a rebuilt Gulf State Park

lodge with a \$58 million price tag. Developers say the lodge will include a “modestly sized” meeting space.

The Gulf Restoration Network, an environmental watchdog organization, has argued that an economic development project is not an appropriate use of NRDA funds. Last week in a Mobile federal courtroom, U.S. District Court Judge Charles Butler heard arguments from both sides of the issue.

Sasaki Associates representative Jill Allen Dixon said the looming threat of pending litigation did not impact the master planning design phase. She said the project team hosted three public meetings to gather input from local residents.

“We’ve had three other open houses and we really tried to listen to what the people who live here have said they want,” Dixon said. “I think we’ve been able to incorporate some of the principles we heard from the people. Everything is environmentally sensitive. We tried to incorporate elements where people can use the park to learn more about the unique ecosystem here.”

The plan will be divided into three phases, the first of which will begin with dune restoration in early February. The project will include the equivalent of what the park planning team calls “50 football fields” of dunes and restoration of the natural dune habitats for beach mice, shore birds and nesting turtles.

Bids were sent out recently for a trail revitalization project, and the lodge rebuild is scheduled to follow that. Project developers say the new lodge will be built with a smaller footprint than the original lodge, which was destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004. The original lodge had been located there since the 1970s.

The initial phase, which also includes the construction of a learning campus and interpretive center, has an expected completion date of 2018.

State Rep. Steve McMillan of Baldwin County said the project is “absolutely” an appropriate use of BP funds, noting he and his wife honeymooned at the old lodge.

“That money was intended to help the Alabama coast recover and this project will certainly do that,” he said. “It will increase tourism, and with the conference center, we can keep people from going out of state for conventions. The environmental benefit will also be considerable. We will have more beach around the lodge than we ever had before.”

According to Baldwin County tourism figures, the county generated \$16.3 million in lodging tax in 2013. Developers estimate the addition of a state lodge and meeting space at Gulf State Park will result in a \$68.2 million economic impact on the coastal economy per year.

“The new lodge and the restored park will help us get people here for more than just a vacation,” Craft said. “We used to attract conventions and meetings to the park in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and this will help us do that again. I am ready to see the project get moving.”

A second phase of work will include additional trail enhancements, a new park tram and improvements to existing campgrounds. The final phase will include enhancements at Lake Shelby North and picnic area improvements.

See this article on lagniappemobile.com to view the master plan.



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