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# Craft: Lodge is important to building shoulder season at the beach

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Allison Woodham / Staff

## Mayor Robert Craft of Gulf Shores



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Others promoted by Gulf Shores and Orange Beach tourism and its active Sports Commission involve a variety of sports. From college national championships in sand volleyball and track, conference championships in softball, track and SEC soccer to the volumes of youth tournaments in a variety of sports, they are shoulder-season drivers.

Posted: Friday, February 5, 2016 5:15 am | Updated: 10:50 am, Fri Feb 5, 2016.

BY JOHN MULLEN [JOHNM@gulfcoastmedia.com](mailto:JOHNM@gulfcoastmedia.com) | 0 comments

GULF SHORES, AL – The shoulder season is not a new concept in the resort towns of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, but one that of late has been gathering momentum.

But one of original drivers of a shoulder season was the old Gulf State Park Lodge and Convention Center.

“What we had in the original lodge and conference center which was built back in the 70s or 60s whenever it was, we had an opportunity for groups to come the conventions,” Gulf Shores Mayor Robert Craft said. “It was a state program so a lot of the state conventions came here and it dramatically changed our shoulder seasons and diversified the people that come here.

“It’s a perfect fit for our shoulder season, spring and fall.”

Shoulder season drivers are now widespread, none greater than the Hangout Music Festival the weekend before Memorial Day that has basically added a holiday weekend to the calendar and starts the season a weekend.

The iconic National Shrimp Festival staged by the Coastal Alabama Business Chamber.

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Shoulder season goals are twofold. Attract visitors to come outside of the traditional three months or so of the summer season. Once they are here and experience what the area has to offer, officials hopes that is an enticement to come back during the traditional season.

Before Hurricane Ivan destroyed the Gulf State Park Lodge in 2004, Craft said it was a shoulder-season driver.

"It introduced us to a lot of businessmen who didn't come here on vacation and they'd come back on vacation," Craft said. "We've missed that. That business was going to Destin or wherever. They're not coming here anymore."

He believes a new lodge and other amenities planned for the Gulf State Park with about \$130 million will provide the potential to start attracting that market again.

"We'll have an opportunity to recapture that and it could absolutely change the game in diversifying our visitor during the shoulder season," Craft said. "They're not going to have conventions in the middle of the summer because they'll be full."

"The people that are doing the conventions want to have them when they can enjoy the area when it's not so crowded. Everybody that we bring here and we can show our brand of Southern hospitality they don't expect and the quality and character of our community, they leave with a different opinion of Alabama."

The project is not without challenges. An environmental group based in New Orleans, Gulf Restoration Network, against NOAA and its parent agency, the Department of the Interior, saying NRDA funds should be used for restoration in the wake of the BP oil spill and not rebuilding a hotel that was destroyed in a hurricane in 2004.

Arguments for both sides were presented to District Court Judge Charles Butler in Mobile on Jan. 26, but the judge didn't give a timetable for issuing a ruling.

In 2013 Gov. Robert Bentley signed a bill authorizing the expenditure of \$85.5 million of Natural Resource Damage Assessment money, a grant program administered through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, for improvements at Gulf State Park.

The bulk, \$58 million, was earmarked to build a new on-beach facility Bentley was at first calling a hotel and convention center. More than \$27 million is allocated for a series of environmental improvements throughout the park including a research and education facility for students, trails and dune restoration.

Recently, \$50 million of BP money was added to the pot for the lodge, meeting space and work on dune restoration, trail enhancement and an educational center on the beach among other things.

Nisa Miranda of the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development was the initial lead on the project in March and presenting the entire Gulf State Park Project to the public in a series of open houses. The final one was Thursday at the Orange Beach Community Center.

In March Miranda said the uncertainty of an impending state or federal lawsuits won't stop her group's work.

"The money has been set aside for this project so there's no reason for us not to move forward," she said. "Who's to know what's going to happen with that."

Sasaki Associates out of Watertown, Mass., has been hired to develop and execute the master plan for the Gulf State Park Project and representatives were on hand Thursday to answer questions from visitors who ranged from residents to local and state politicians.

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