

Nisa Miranda laying groundwork for new Gulf State Park facility

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GULF SHORES, AL — A new facility on the beach in Gulf State Park will may be a few years from reality, but Nisa Miranda of the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development is hard at work laying the groundwork for the project.

On March 6 she was the guest speaker for the Coastal Alabama Business Chamber's First Friday Forum at LuLu's. She'll lead a community Gulf State Park Master Plan Open House forum on the new facility on March 26 at the Orange Beach Community Center.

Miranda, the director of the center at the university, is primarily focused on community relations surrounding the building of the new facility.

Before Hurricane Ivan in September of 2004 the state park operated a hotel on the site. It was damaged beyond repair in the storm and torn down. This stretch of prime beach has remained empty since.

Miranda and her staff's job is to make a case for the facility as not just a meeting space and a place for tourists to catch some rays.

"I'm the one to focus on how we can work with the community and community relations," Miranda said. "What I'll be talking about with the group is giving them some insight as to what's going to be happening over the next four years. The lodge and meeting space is a centerpiece and will be one of the first things we focus on.

"But, of course, because it's a complicated project, the main part is planning. It'll take about a year for the master plan and a little over a year for the design and all the blueprints for construction for the lodge."

Friday's talk is just the first of several Miranda will conduct in Baldwin County during March to get public input and involvement.



Nisa Miranda

“Expanding our recreation and our eco-tourism opportunities linking to sister entities around the area like Week’s Bay and 5 Rivers and others that are around there, we’re really trying to invigorate the eco-tourism sector,” she said.

“There’s so much potential in that whole area and there are several pockets of it starting to pop up. We’re really trying to raise the profile of the whole area as an eco-tourism area and linking all of the resources.”

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.

Several projects in the five Gulf Coast states were negotiated with BP and Alabama’s federal and state partners as part of the ongoing recovery from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion and BP oil spill. There were about 44 projects totaling \$627 million were approved by the NRDA Trustee Council and BP.

The legality of the similar projects for the site was questioned in court cases. Gulf Shores Mayor Robert Craft said he hopes the bill will stand up should it be taken to court. Similar bills to develop a lodge with a private partner have not withstood legal challenges.

“There have been challenges by some of the hotel organizations there who have sued the state because they don’t believe the state should be in the realm of private business,” Miranda said. “Because of all that we are really focused on it being a location where there will be education and research and the opportunity for meeting space.”

Another challenge has been filed in U.S. District Court in New Orleans by an environmental group, 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.

The uncertainty of an impending state or federal lawsuits, Miranda says, 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.”