



'Misunderstood' Gulf State Park Project on track for 2018 completion, executive director says

2004-aerial-of-gulf-state-park-resort-31763a25f286a29b.jpg

A 2004 photograph of the Gulf State Park Lodge and fishing pier. (File Photo)

Dennis Pillion | dpillion@al.com By Dennis Pillion | dpillion@al.com

Email the author | Follow on Twitter

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An **\$85 million project** to build several improvements to Gulf State Park -- including a \$56 million lodge and meeting space -- has drawn both vocal critics and ardent supporters since it was announced last year, but the project's executive director says many who criticize the project are making incorrect assumptions about what the finished product will be.

"A lot of people have just misunderstood what this project is about, and what we're trying to accomplish," said Cooper Shattuck, executive director of the project for the University of Alabama System and a former legal adviser to Gov. Robert Bentley. "I think that once people get a better understanding of what it is we're doing, I think a lot of the concerns are just simply unfounded.

"This project has been approved by all of the federal agencies involved, including EPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Dept. of the Interior, NOAA, and the Trustees have approved it. All those Trustees have as a goal to restore and protect the environment."

The goal of the lodge, Shattuck said is to create a property on the Gulf that is "sustainable environmentally and economically."

Shattuck said the new lodge and meeting space will fit entirely within the footprint of the old lodge, which was destroyed in 2004 by Hurricane Ivan. He said the University of Alabama System, which Bentley tasked with overseeing the project, has hired architects and contractors experienced in the latest green building techniques, and that the lodge would seek the most ambitious certifications for sustainable building techniques.

"It's a unique property and our goal is to embrace that and make it a unique facility," Shattuck said. "Our belief is that in doing so, rather than trying to fit a square peg into a round hole by taking a typical hotel and dropping it on the beach, but thinking about the uniqueness of this location on the beach and embracing it. Doing that well will make the facility itself an attraction which will draw people not just to it, but to the natural resources, which is the whole goal of the project."

Supporters of the project say it will help stimulate tourism, and generate business for the local economies, in addition to providing significant revenue for the entire Alabama State Parks system, which depends mostly on user fees and not tax dollars for support.

Though early descriptions of the project called the lodge a convention center or conference center, Shattuck said those descriptions were not really accurate. He said the building will be a lodge and meeting space only and that it would not be big enough for large-scale conventions.

"The idea is to have sufficient meeting space to go with the lodge of that size, as was there before, so that meetings can be held there," he said. "The goal and purpose is to provide an opportunity for people to stay there and not just to come to a meeting there."

Shattuck said that a **lawsuit filed** by conservation group Gulf Restoration Network to stop the project has not and would not slow down progress on the park. The suit named the Trustees who approved the project rather than Alabama, which proposed the project.

"If you read the complaint that was filed, and if you look at the information we have publically available about the project, you'll see that the way they described the project and the way we describe the project are totally different," he said. "What they've alleged is not accurate, so that lawsuit has not slowed us down. We're not concerned about that lawsuit."

The project is still in the design and planning phase, Shattuck said, and architects, planners and civil engineers have been hired, but there are no schematics or renderings as of yet of what the new lodge would look like.

Though the lodge is the largest and most noticeable aspect of the project, it is just one of five aspects of the project. The other four are: improvements to trails and other visitor facilities; dune restoration along the beach; building an environmental information center near the existing beach pavilion; and building a research and education center on Middle Lake that would include classrooms, laboratories and dorm rooms for overnight educational programming.

Planners have begun surveying the park and the dune restoration work could begin soon, once planners are satisfied the restored dunes would not be imperiled by future construction projects.

The project being funded through the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process resulting from the **2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill**, and critics (and litigants) have argued that the project is an inappropriate use of NRDA funding.

Shattuck said he was among the early negotiating team representing the state in negotiations with BP and the other NRDA Trustees to get this project approved, and said improving facilities for the public to enjoy natural resources that experienced a loss of use during the spill is an appropriate use of NRDA funds.

For more details on the project, the **University of Alabama has launched a project-specific web site** that will be updated throughout the process.

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