



## Public input welcomed on Gulf State Park project master plan

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"We'd like to design it so that we are changing the dune system as least as possible," -- Bob Harris, Flato Lake

***"Gulf State Park will be an international benchmark of environmental and economic sustainability demonstrating best practices for outdoor recreation, education and hospitable accommodations."***

So reads the Gulf State Park Restoration Project vision statement revealed during an open house at the Orange Beach Community Center Thursday.

The open house gave stakeholders and members of the public an early look at elements of an emerging master plan that will ultimately govern a planned \$85 million project to build a lodge and meeting spaces as well as other improvements throughout the park.

The old lodge was destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

The project was approved in October 2014 and being funded through **Alabama's \$93 million share of the \$1 billion first round of Natural Resource Damage Assessment penalties BP agreed to pay to compensate states for environmental damages caused by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill.**

The project is still in the design and planning phase, and architects, planners and civil engineers were on hand to give attendees the opportunity to have input on all of its elements.

During a short presentation on the process of developing the master plan and how people can get involved, Jill Allen Dixon, project manager for the Gulf State Park master plan team from Sasaki Associates, said of the 6,150-acre park, "There's almost nothing like Gulf State Park anywhere on the Gulf Coast."

Dixon based her statement not only on the park's uncommonly large total acreage, but also because of its diversity of habitats and ecology.

Dixon said the master plan recommendations will address topics such as conservation and ecosystem management, ideas for new programs and activities, educational opportunities, park operations, how to make the park better for pedestrians and bicyclists and marketing and branding.

Conceptual drawings of what the new lodge would look like are still several months off, said Bob Harris, a

partner with lead design firm, Lake Flato Architects, based in San Antonio, Texas.

Harris said his team's goal is to design "site-sensitive architecture" that will sit lightly on the Earth and engage the surrounding dune system.

"We'd like to design it so that we are changing the dune system as least as possible," Harris said.

The lodge will be built on pilings that will elevate it above storm surge while also allowing the dune system underneath to continue performing its natural function as a barrier to high waves moving inland and as the basis of a complex ecosystem.

Unlike most of the rest of Alabama's beach, Harris said this stretch of state-owned land has not had any dune enhancement work performed, so that will likely be part of some of the earliest work done at the site.

Though the lodge is the largest, most noticeable and with an estimated \$58.5 million price tag, the costliest aspect of the project, it is just one of five key elements.

The other four, estimated at a combined \$27 million to complete, 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.

People will have two more opportunities to have input on the master plan as it takes shape later this spring and again in late summer. It is scheduled to be finalized sometime this fall.

Leon Barkan, vice-president of construction management with Vokert Inc., said ground could be broken on the lodge construction in the first quarter of 2016.

The lodge will take about two years to complete, but other components of construction and enhancement within the park will likely come online much sooner.

In addition to the Gulf State Park project, the trustees approved a \$5 million living shoreline project in Bon Secour Bay and a \$3.2 million project to create oyster reefs in Mobile County.

Opponents of the plan to build the lodge, **including the Gulf Restoration Network, which has sued to block its construction**, believe the NRDA process dictates the money be used on projects that restore habitats and/or protect land damaged directly impacted by the oil spill.

**Those in favor of the lodge project claim it meets NRDA's loss-of-use standard that states projects**

**qualify if people were prevented from enjoying state resources and facilities because of the oil spill.**

Gulfwide the total complement of projects approved by the trustees totaled \$627 million, with the largest amount, \$313 million, going to rebuilding barrier islands in Louisiana. Louisiana totaled \$340 million in approved projects, with Mississippi receiving \$69 million, Alabama getting \$93 million, Florida with \$103 million and Texas \$18 million.

To check out the vision for the Gulf State Park project, **click here**. People can add their recommendations to the master plan by **completing a survey here**.

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