

The Sun Herald

Environmental groups, Alabama face off over hotel for Gulf State Park

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A danger sign warns visitors to stay away from the hotel at Gulf State Park in Gulf Shores, Ala., in 2005. One of the most beautiful pieces of property in Alabama, a sandy white stretch at Gulf State Park, could become the site of a large hotel and conference center.

MONTGOMERY, Ala. -- Two of Alabama's premier state parks could soon get their own hotels -- if they can overcome legal battles, budget cuts and public dissent.

Gulf State Park, on the coast, and Oak Mountain State Park, just south of Birmingham, are both planning major upgrades accompanied by multimillion-dollar lodging complexes.

Staying in a full-service suite might not be everyone's version of a night in the great outdoors, but officials say hotels are needed to attract new visitors and new revenue.

The Gulf State Park project, the larger of the two, has existed in various forms since Hurricane Ivan decimated the 6,150-acre park in 2004. The storm ruined a convention center that two Alabama governors have now spent a decade trying to rebuild.

On April 20, 2010, the park and its treasured white sand beaches faced another catastrophe with the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe, when millions of gallons of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico.

Along with a new full-service hotel, a master plan for the \$85 million project -- managed by the University of Alabama -- includes restored ecological areas and new educational facilities.

The goal is to finally replace the former hotel with a modern facility for an environmentally conscious generation, Alabama State Parks Director Greg Lein said.

"You don't just put it back," Lein said. "Why do you rebuild a building that was built in the 1970s? You need to think about the present and the future."

But a lawsuit from an environmental group threatens to strip more than half of the project's funding.

The Gulf Restoration Network in October sued the U.S. Department of the Interior and several other federal agencies over their decision to allow Alabama to use \$58.5 million of the state's allotted \$100 million recovery funds from the 2010 BP oil spill.

Earlier this month, a federal judge agreed to move the lawsuit from Washington, D.C., to the southern federal district in Alabama.

Jordan Macha, a policy analyst for the Gulf Restoration Network, said Alabama is missing an opportunity to repair and restore wetlands and other habitats damaged by the oil spill.

"When you look at recreational loss of use and the criteria for what constitutes loss of use, hotel and convention center does not fall into that category," Macha said. "There were no oiled convention centers during the BP disaster."

Focus groups with a wide range of interested parties -- including residents, business owners, scientists and developers -- are being conducted to understand what the park needs, said Nisa Miranda, director of the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development.

"We're living in a more modern age," she said. "People are more conscious and interested in being respectful and taking into consideration natural resources, so the vision and the mindset for this project is very forward-thinking."

This is the second time Alabama's attempts to build a new conference center at the park has drawn litigation. A court blocked an earlier plan to build a 350-room hotel and let Auburn University lease it to a private management company.

At Oak Mountain State Park, a recent feasibility study recommended a "lodge"-like facility with 175 rooms and 20,000 square feet of meeting space. The \$35 million project is estimated to have an annual economic impact of \$18.4 million.

Shelby County Manager Alex Dudchock said plans are still in the preliminary stage. He said it would be an amenity that doesn't already exist in the park or in Shelby County.

"When you add in all the wonderful outdoor recreational options that the park provides, it would be an impressive array of offerings that visitors could appreciate," Dudchock said.

Yet some want Alabama's largest state park to maintain its rustic feel.

Keep Oak Mountain Wild, a nonprofit formed to fight the development, mentions a number of criticisms on its website. An online petition urges readers to oppose the project.

Despite plans for growth, the entire park system is preparing for massive cuts. The system could be forced to close 15 of 22 parks, as the Alabama Legislature and Gov. Robert Bentley look to solve a looming budget crisis over a shortfall in the 2016 general fund.

Bentley and lawmakers have been at odds about where to make cuts and where to raise taxes to keep Alabama afloat.

According to park system officials, lawmakers could remove millions from the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources budget for 2016. About \$10.4 million of the \$11.4 million in possible cuts would come from the State Parks System.

In an interview this month, Lein said it's tough to plan long-term growth for the park system when it's faced with short-term uncertainty.

"How do I keep the park system attractive when there's all this gloom and doom about the budget? How do you deal with that?"

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