



Our view: Gulf State Park project is reasonable, responsible

Gulf State Park.jpg

In this early 2004 aerial file photo, the Gulf State Park Resort lines a half-mile stretch of beach east of the park's pier. Later that year, Hurricane Ivan with its strong Category 3 storm surge decimated the resort, which was later demolished. (AL.com)

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If the Gulf State Park project were a mega-development dropping from the sky onto a place where no lodge had existed before, we would be seriously concerned.

But that's not the case. The goal of the \$85.5 million project planned for Alabama's premier state park, which draws 600,000 visitors annually, is to replace a previous structure with a reasonably sized lodge and meeting space that would be both economically and environmentally sustainable.

We feel comfortable with the plan mostly because of the design, which demonstrates restraint *and* environmental stewardship. According to the plans, the lodge and meeting center would fit within the footprint of the previous lodge and conference center that Hurricane Ivan leveled in 2004. The new 300-room lodge would not be so large as to host the super-sized conventions, but it could still accommodate many groups who prefer to meet in Alabama and spend their money close to home, rather than in nearby states.

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The hang-up for opponents – and the subject of a federal lawsuit brought by the Gulf Restoration Network — is the project's funding through the Natural Resources Damage Assessment process related to the BP oil spill. The spill, they say, didn't cover any convention center in oil.

Being covered in oil, however, is not a requirement for NRDA funding, which is authorized through the Oil Pollution Act. The NRDA trustees have already given the go-ahead for the Gulf State Park project as part of early restoration projects, in keeping with their mission to restore resources "directly or indirectly" harmed by oil from the spill. The trustees include the EPA, the Departments of Interior, Commerce, Agriculture and representatives from the five Gulf states.

The trustees rightly recognize that the spill harmed coastal Alabama and its residents in a variety of ways, including the closing off of public access to beaches, fishing and related recreation. The Gulf State Park project

would return some of that public access in an environmentally responsible fashion.

Supporters say the project could be a model for "green development." The design involves environmental stewardship, as is described on the website for the project, being headed by the University of Alabama System. Of the \$85.5 million total for enhancements, more than \$27 million would go to environmental and educational improvements, such as a research and education facility for students, trail development, a 50-acre dune restoration and a coastal ecosystems interpretive center.

It's difficult to argue with a plan that showcases the beauty that coastal Alabama has to offer even as it teaches young people about ecosystems and how to protect them.

The economic impact of these improvements, meanwhile, cannot be overlooked. At a time when the state's 22 parks face possible closure over budget cuts, this project would give Gulf State Park the immediate and long-term means to not only support itself but also help to sustain sister parks. This is a bonus to an already responsible plan.

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