

## **Gulf Shores plan to give new look to beachfront**

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**Staff Reporter**

GULF SHORES -- At the base of Alabama 59, several lots once boasting beach houses, restaurants, bars, shops and small amusement parks sit empty, growing weeds as they have since Hurricane Ivan blew through in September 2004.

Though there have been delays -- partly due to a weakened market for expensive waterfront real estate and somewhat because of government's slow spinning wheels -- there is a plan in place to transform this central beach area from an intersection of two four-lane highways into a dense, pedestrian-friendly downtown of high-rises, sidewalk cafes, ground-floor retailers, hidden parking lots and wide public spaces.

That plan, called Envision Gulf Shores, was born of a months-long process in which city officials, developers and residents worked with Atlanta-based consultants Jordan, Jones & Goulding to blueprint the city's future, particularly at its central beach area.

The plan is ambitious, to be sure. The beach highway, Alabama 182, will have to be moved two blocks north to reroute traffic around the proposed town center, large-scale developments the size of city blocks must be approved and sold, an overhaul and expansion of the city's public beach area is planned and complicated public-private land swaps must be hashed out. But in the end Gulf Shores is hoping to create a magnetic surfside downtown without peer on the northern Gulf Coast.

Earlier this month, the Gulf Shores City Council approved a development deal with HSK Properties LLC. That plan should lead to construction of a 23-story tower called Park Place that combines hundreds of hotel rooms, ground floor shopping and dining, and enclosed public parking along Alabama 59. Though the designs for Park Place still must go through another round of vetting at the hands of the Gulf Shores Planning Commission and the council, it was the first of the so-called "Envision" projects to win any sort of approval.

Park Place was designed by WHL Architecture, a Southeastern firm with offices in Baton Rouge, La.; Biloxi; and Fairhope. WHL has also been hired by Shaul Zislin, a local entrepreneur and real estate developer who owns three of the four corners at the intersection of Alabama Highways 59 and 182. Zislin said Monday that although his development plans for the parcels have not been finalized, mixed-use buildings along the same lines as Park Place can be expected.

In the employ of two of the downtown redevelopment area's primary private landowners, HSK and Zislin, WHL is in a unique position to shape what is

arguably one of the most popular and well-visited square miles in the state. The Press-Register asked the firm's design director, Rex Cabaniss, what he and his team envision for the heart of Gulf Shores.

**Press-Register:** You've obviously become familiar with the Envision Gulf Shores plan. Why do you think it will work, and what are the plan's strengths?

**Rex Cabaniss:** Public involvement is the key to success. The Envision plan creatively engaged a broad range of citizen, business and municipal agency input. It also aimed high. Its comprehensive scope addresses urban design, environmental, land use, traffic, commercial, residential and tourism issues by asking "What's the best we can do by working together to dream big?" The plan takes a big picture, long-range view, to present a new way of looking at Gulf Shores and how to positively manage and coordinate future growth.

When an area this large can be collectively envisioned through time-tested planning principles that capture the desires of the community, the built results are significantly greater than the sum of the individual parts.

**P-R:** In representing two of the major private landowners in the proposed city center, your firm appears to have a great opportunity to shape the look of Gulf Shores. What sort of style and architectural features can be expected?

**RC:** These high-profile lifestyle centers will establish a quality level of mixed-use, resort-style destinations. As to architectural style, I would call it "coastal contemporary," designed and crafted to capture the best of traditional, timeless character along with fresh, modern innovations. These amenity-rich environments are all about ambiance and flavor, offering multi-layered experiences and variety.

The streetscape is a prime focus, with shaded colonnades, galleries, fountains, plazas, shop fronts and gathering spaces to enrich the pedestrian access, comfort and enjoyment. The goal is "placemaking," creating wonderful environments, places and spaces where people want to be

**P-R:** Describe how you envision this planned downtown in 2010, or whenever these buildings are finished.

**RC:** When it all comes together, downtown will be truly special, a place like no other: A vibrant marketplace of activity, to live, work, shop and play. A tight-knit urban village by the sea, with something for everyone. An immersive environment, offering both the vitality of commercial activity and restful areas of great natural beauty, all in dynamic harmony.

An authentic, sustainable, "real" community; rooted in the rich local heritage and culture. A downtown of "people places," at once familiar yet full of surprises; full

of sights, sounds, flavors, colors, textures, and contrasting uses; in essence -- full of life.

**P-R:** It seems like these developments will have to flow together, or at least have more connectivity than traditional beachside resorts, particularly in terms of making the retail space viable. How do you plan to do that?

**RC:** You're right, walkability or pedestrian connectivity is a must. Rather than typical, disjointed, stand-alone buildings of limited civic ambition, these developments provide a network of charming, stroll-along pathways. The streetscape focus is the common link. Freely accessed, inviting, open public spaces intertwine the mixed-uses together. The aesthetic energy and collective commercial vitality is what most distinguishes planned town centers from standard strip development. It makes all the difference.

**P-R:** Baldwin County has 32 miles of Gulf-front, yet when you talk about the beach here, a lot of people think first of the stretch of sand at the base of Alabama 59. How does being in the middle of that public space -- one of the state's most well known -- play into your designs?

**RC:** The Gulf is the heartbeat, it brings the area life, it brings us together. The beach is the magnet, the priceless amenity space. The beauty and power of such a natural setting should be honored, protected, shared and celebrated. Good design and smart growth builds on and enhances the inherent strengths of a site such as this. The public space will be a centerpiece for the town center, the backdrop, the thematic focus. The city's name says it all -- Gulf Shores -- that's what draws people.

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**P-R:** A main component of the Envision plan is to reroute Alabama 182 around the planned downtown. This sort of goes against a conventional line of thinking that a business will be more successful the more traffic that passes by it. What is the reasoning behind the move to decrease vehicle traffic?

**RC:** It does seem counter-intuitive at first, but this is the major strategy to open up the blocked potential of this location, and will clearly transform it. The current traffic congestion is a real deterrent to encouraging a successful town center. Much of the daily traffic that fills the area around Alabama highways 59 and 182 is in transit to some place else. Rerouting the transit traffic will clear the way for

the desired destination traffic that will stop and do business downtown, plus greatly increase its attraction as a unique commercial environment for residents and visitors alike.

**P-R:** Everyone's been to the beach, and pretty much everyone's familiar with downtowns in which hotels and residential towers are combined with shopping malls, office space and city centers, but picturing the two together isn't so easy. Are there other projects or areas in other cities that might offer a glimpse into the future here?

**RC:** Good question. Our favorite cities are often known for their waterfronts, too many to mention. The major coastal tourism states -- Florida, California, Hawaii -- have good examples, plus renowned coastal cities worldwide. Fine examples are rare in the immediate region, and that gives Gulf Shores a prime opportunity to stand out, and position itself as a waterfront city of great beauty and prominence.

A certain urban density is required to support a broad spectrum of desired commercial amenities. Picture a bustling downtown along a spectacular beachfront, this dynamic contrast provides the magic.

**P-R:** How do you see these developments interacting with the traditional functions of the beach, the volleyball games and sunbathers and sunset-watching snowbirds?

**RC:** It's all about bringing groups of people together. As these developments increase and improve the capacity and character of connected public spaces, the beach areas and activities will benefit. Beachfront promenades, boardwalks, plazas, kiosks, pavilions, roof terraces and balconies will all focus on providing access, vistas and support for enjoying the beach. The beach is the source attraction. With careful planning, proper design and diligent stewardship, generations to come will all share the rewards.

**P-R:** One of the problems Baldwin County's beaches have had over recent years is that a lot of old hotels have been torn down to make way for condo towers, which typically cost a lot more and usually require a longer stay than a hotel room -- if they're rented at all. Park Place is going to be a hotel, and city officials have said Shaul Zislin's projects may follow suit. Obviously the market for 2,000-square-foot condominiums has dwindled lately, but were there other considerations in going with hotel rooms?

**RC:** This is a national trend. Mixed-use developments integrating hotels or condo-hotels with shopping and dining amenities have a dynamic synergy that energizes the internal components of the development, but also supports surrounding commercial vitality. It's a win-win for the community.

**P-R:** Though central, these projects you're designing cover a pretty small portion of Gulf Shores. Do you see them influencing the manner in which adjoining parcels are redeveloped? What long-range effect would you like to see come from these projects?

**RC:** These are big steps in the right direction. It will raise the bar on public expectations, as a benchmark for future growth. The long-range goal to enhance the entire Gulf Shores community will gain momentum when the aesthetic, cultural and economic benefits are easy to see in built form. The Envision plan is all about the power of positive change, by utilizing smart growth principles to optimize the quality of the built environment.

**P-R:** Lastly, the Envision process in a large part incorporates the ideas of Gulf Shores' everyday residents. How would you grade them on their design sense and what sort of response do you expect from them when these projects are completed?

**RC:** The Envision plan captures the collective wisdom, common interests and community aspirations of the citizens of Gulf Shores. The plan reflects that good choices were made in considering the direction of future growth. The building of this new town center should likewise reflect back what is important to the community. Does it fit? How does it look? How does it feel to be there? Does it work? Simple questions, but rooted in deep civic values.

As architects working with developers on these projects, we're excited about bringing something special to Gulf Shores and anticipate a tremendous response. As a community on the threshold of future growth, working together to build a place of lasting value will leave a positive legacy.