

May 26, 2008

JEKYLL ISLAND AUTHORITY SAYS REVITALIZATION PLANS STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS

Since I had talked recently to David Egan — whose group, the Initiative to Protect Jekyll Island, has great concerns about the island's proposed revitalization — I thought it only fair to see what the Jekyll Island Authority has to say. (Besides, it affords me the opportunity to stop by the exquisite little Georgia Sea Grill on St. Simons Island and stuff my face with corn-fried shrimp. Being a modest and much-beloved columnist does have its rewards.)

The JIA's message is simple: Relax. Everything is still in the planning stage. A lot of details have to be ironed out before revitalization plans are finalized. The revitalization is a work in progress. Eric Garvey, the authority's senior director of marketing, says the controversy over the proposal has occurred because the Jekyll Island Authority and the developer, Linger Longer Communities, chose to intentionally put out a "concept plan" to initiate discussion.

And did it ever. I have received hundreds of emails from all over the country — the vast majority opposed to what they have seen or heard about the authority's intentions.

"Those who have voiced concerns about what is being planned for Jekyll Island's redevelopment need to understand that we are listening to them," Garvey insists, "and the next iteration of the Linger Longer plan will reflect that." The revised plan should be ready around July 1 and Garvey says the JIA will be seeking additional comments.

Garvey points out that you can plan in a vacuum or you can get input from all concerned. The JIA, he says, has chosen the latter. If they had it to do over again, I think the organization would have put more effort into communicating up front its good intentions.

By and large, the public doesn't believe that government at any level is capable of organizing a two-car funeral, much less the revitalization of one of Georgia's most treasured assets. The JIA should have seen that one coming.

Garvey emphasizes that the Jekyll Island Authority is a conservation-based organization. While many Georgians care for Jekyll Island, none do more than the people who work for the authority and who have dedicated their careers to preserving the island's public assets. Exhibit Number One is Jekyll's recently opened and magnificent Georgia Sea Turtle Center. It is a jewel.

Furthermore, Garvey says that whatever the final plan, the emphasis will be on "green." JIA's marketing chief says the intent is for all future development to achieve or exceed environmental construction standards.

What about the discrepancy in the numbers being tossed around both by opponents of the redevelopment and the JIA? "Numbers can be used any way you want depending on what you are trying to prove," Garvey said. "For planning purposes, we are taking a long-term view — 1980 to 2008 — and plugging in a lot of raw data. I'm not sure slicing numbers for a year or two proves anything." That statement is an obvious jab at the Initiative to Protect Jekyll Island's publication of automobile traffic counts from 1996-97.

As for accommodations, Garvey points out that quality lodging is essential because most people visiting Jekyll Island live too far away to take a daytrip and there are not enough quality facilities available at the current time. He says the intent is not to make the island "exclusive." The plan must include more rooms and a variety of choices: cottages, existing campgrounds and condominiums oriented to tourism, not full-time residences. This is perhaps the most sensitive point to those who are concerned about the Linger Longer plan.

After looking at this issue from the perspectives of the developer, the grassroots groups and the Jekyll Island Authority, I think that a solution is on the way if everyone will lower the rhetoric, muzzle the grandstanding politicians and develop some mutual trust. The good news is that there are well-intentioned people on both sides of the issue. Everybody wants what is best for Jekyll Island and its future. For the moment, let's all take a deep breath and see what the revised plan looks like.