

An Easy Q&A on Harbor Front Redevelopment

Here's a Q&A about Destin's conceptual redevelopment plans for the harbor area, which were unveiled last week to the public. More than 100 people turned out for a meeting at the City Hall Annex to listen to a presentation and view a slide show.

The questions were raised by The Log and the answers were contributed by Hank Woollard, manager of Destin's Community Redevelopment Agency, which oversees the initiative.

Q: What's different today in Destin that may contribute to this project actually starting and finishing, unlike Visions 2000 in the mid-1990s and the Sasaki plan in the late 1990s?

A: Funding and consensus. With the creation of the CRA, the adoption of the Land Development Code Tier System, and a new impact fee structure — there are dedicated funds for the improvements. Through previous planning efforts, consensus was reached on the boardwalk, parking, public access to the harbor, and streetscape/ roadway improvements. This process is really about refining how we do those things.

Q: If the plans are implemented and I take a stroll along the harbor, what will I see? How will it be different from now? Paint me a word picture.

A: I think the big difference is that you will have those visual cues such as light fixtures,

signage, banners, that let you know you are in a public space and it's "OK" to keep going. The landscaping will be improved and you will also not have some of the bottlenecks or obstructions you see now. There will also be attractive and clearly defined access from Harbor Boulevard to the boardwalk.

Q: What if not everyone who owns harbor front property is willing to spend money to fix up their property to conform to the Tetra Tech plan? Could they be sued? Is it more or less peer pressure that would convince them to jump on the bandwagon?

A: The implementation will not all happen at once. Some people have no immediate or long-term plans to develop their harbor front property, and that's fine. The CRA is not going to sue anyone to make the improvements. As various property owners do make the improvements, others may decide they like what they see and decide to follow suit. There is also a lot of variation on boardwalk concepts along the harbor. Some may not be that expensive to build. We may need to formulate some kind of an incentive program where the CRA would front the money for the improvements to be repaid at a later date.

Q: What does it mean for Destin as a desirable place to visit and live if these plans are implemented?

A: Great cities are known by the quality of

their public amenities. Improving the public spaces creates a better community for everyone, in safety, aesthetics, community pride, recreation opportunities.

Q: How do these plans affect the Average Joe who owns no property on the harbor? Will he want to go to the harbor to hang out?

A: These plans will preserve and improve public access to the harbor. The boardwalk and Melvin parcel will be like a linear public park. (The Melvin parcel is a 68-foot strip of land just west of Fisherman's Wharf restaurant, running from the waterfront to Harbor Boulevard.) We believe the more convenient it is to park and get to the harbor, the more people will go. Improved traffic calming and pedestrian improvements on Harbor Boulevard, Mountain Drive and other streets will mean a safer, more enjoyable experience for everyone. People like to go to the main plaza at Destin Commons and hang out because it is a high-quality place to just "be" with interactive things for the kids. If we are successful with the Melvin parcel and the boardwalk, people like Average Joe (and Average Jane) will want to "be" there.

Q: Who's paying for the improvements if they're implemented?

A: There are three primary sources of funding: a portion of the property tax people already pay is dedicated to the Harbor CRA; impact fees from new development; and the public benefit requirement for those developments that want to maximize their

height and density through the Tier 3 provisions of the Land Development Code.

Q: How much money exists in the CRA kitty today? How rapidly does the fund grow?

A: After you subtract the current consultant contracts, there's about \$170,000 "in the Harbor CRA kitty." How rapidly the revenue grows depends upon the timing of new development and on what the state Legislature does about property taxes, but under the status quo, there should be another \$1 million in 2008, \$1.5 million in 2009, \$2.1 million in 2010, and increasing by about 1.2 million a year from that point on. Our borrowing depends on the projections. We think we can borrow about \$15 million near term and then four or five years later, about \$45 million.

Q: Will some of the current harbor front property owners be called on someday to spend some of their own money to help carry out this project?

A: New development along the harbor front, under the current regulations, will be required to provide the access and to construct the boardwalk. Tier 3 projects will probably fund some of the other improvements.

Q: Are we talking millions of dollars?

A: Only if it is a very large project, on the scale of the Emerald Grande, and then depending upon how elaborate they want to make it.

Q: Give us an idea of how much all of this work would cost?

A: Too early to tell with only preliminary concepts. In September, Tetra Tech will provide cost estimates on the near-term projects shown in the preliminary concepts. Cost estimates to implement the projects in 2003 Harbor CRA Plan were at \$70 million. With increased costs for property and construction, you can count on more than that for implementation of all projects in the CRA plan.

Q: How might the property tax changes facing the state affect the harbor redevelopment plan here in Destin?

A: Mainly the timing of implementation. Much of the funding comes from the portion of property taxes collected in the CRA that, by law, must be spent in the CRA. (Remember there's not an extra tax — it's just that some of what gets collected may be spent only in the CRA on approved projects.) If the property tax revenue is less, then there is less money to work with. Although, if lower property taxes stimulates the real estate market and new development gets built sooner — then taxes collected on the new construction would come in sooner.

Q: Has it been determined that the trees and other landscaping along the harbor will indeed grow in areas that for years have been parking lots and gravel lots?

A: Are you asking from the biological standpoint, if plants will grow? Yes, I think that is possible and it's a fairly quick and low-cost way of dressing up the harbor-front now.

Q: When might a visitor to the harbor first see evidence the project is under way?

A: When they picked up last Saturday's Log! The existing buildings on the Melvin parcel will be demolished within a few weeks. We will probably put a sign up on the Melvin parcel announcing future improvements, but it may be fall of 2008 before any construction begins. We envision a "program" of improvements that will involve several different projects.

Q: How many years before total completion?

A: Again, we have a redevelopment program that will involve several projects phased over a number of years. In September we will ask the CRA Board to prioritize what we do with the available (or anticipated) funding. Until that happens, any kind of schedule I might attempt would be highly speculative. Some of it will depend on when private developers do their projects, some will depend on funding. I think the Melvin parcel improvements will happen nearer term. Streetscape improvements on Harbor Boulevard may be a few years off. If you mean, when will all of the Harbor CRA Plan projects be completed, then it could be 15-20 years or longer.

Q: What sort of disruption would be expected during Phase 1 construction?

A: We don't know what Phase I is yet. If it's improving the Melvin parcel, any disruption would mostly be limited to the site. If it's rebuilding Mountain Drive, then there would be disruption on par with a major road project.

Q: What are the boundaries of the entire Harbor CRA?

A: On the west, it's Choctawhatchee Bay and

a stretch of Calhoun Drive; on the north, it's Azalea Drive and a line just south of Legion Drive; on the east, it's Beach Drive and a stretch of U.S. 98, ending at Main Street; on the south, it's the harbor front.

Q: What are the boundaries of the redevelopment initiative?

A: On the south, it's the harbor; on the north, it's Mountain Drive and a short stretch just north of Forest Street; on the west, it's the bay; and on the east, just east of Benning Drive.