

Authority Board Votes For Overpass At Marathon Meeting

The six members of the Santa Rosa Island Authority Board traveled a long and winding road which ended at the main intersection of Pensacola Beach. They voted, 5 to 1, at their February 8 Full Board meeting to recommend that a vehicular overpass be constructed as a major component of the Pensacola Beach Master Plan for core area redevelopment. Dr. Thomas Campanella, elected member, cast the opposing vote. The estimated cost is \$25 million.

The two year journey began with Ft. Lauderdale based planners EDSA creating a conceptual Master Plan. A thirteen member steering committee reviewed the plan and made recommendations to the SRIA board. Escambia County hired engineers who submitted two buildable options. The first included a pedestrian overwalk and the other, a vehicular overpass. Both plans reduce the number of available parking spaces, but increase safety and pedestrian access from the Beach to the Sound. One possible funding source is an increase in the toll to \$2.

The boardroom was overflowing with concerned citizens. Comments came from 18 speakers, among them were members of the recently disbanded Steering Committee. The Steering Committee members Jim Cox, Marilyn Hess, Julian MacQueen

and Robert Rinke all spoke in favor of the overpass option.

"We have one chance to do something truly amazing," said hotelier Marilyn Hess. "We have the ability to update our island and be the only pedestrian-friendly beach. Every place else has messed it up."

Hotelier Julian MacQueen asked the Board to look to the future.

"Look forward and beyond. Allow for the growth and demand that would come to Pensacola Beach," he added. "Look at the future and the competitive advantage. This shows that we value our guests and visitors over the vehicles."

Beverly Campbell, Sandshaker owner and Beach resident, was concerned about the cost and goal of the redevelopment.

"This started as a parking issue and now it is a safety concern," she said. "We need to know what we need to accomplish here. To go into debt and to raise the toll concerns me. I would rather see a pedestrian overpass with the other money spent on the relocation of our Visitor's Center."

Bill Compton, a Beach resident who is an urban planner, asked the board to use a common sense approach with a landscaped pedestrian sidewalk system, parallel to the roads.

"Why are you spending this kind of money to address an oc-

casional problem?" he inquired. "I strongly and professionally recommend against these options."

Speakers offered alternatives which ranged from crossing guards to lowering the speed limit to 15 miles per hour.

Board member and Beach resident Tammy Bohannon thanked the community for attending the meeting.

"We were tasked to get a consensus. People in the audience want to do nothing. Over the past thirty years, we have put plans on the shelf. We need to move forward. Businesses have made an investment out here and we (SRIA) have not made an investment. Plan B will provide a sense of arrival and a wow factor," she said.

Board Chairman Dave Pavlock commented, "This is Escambia County's biggest playground. I love the plan, but it's too much to pay for the result that we expect. We need something that is a little bit cheaper, but will still increase the level of service at the intersection."

In addition to the reservations about cost and esthetics of the project, Campanella questioned the entire process.

"I don't mind backing up. This kinda got out of hand," he said. "Before we spend \$25 million that the County does not have, we need to retime lights, move crossing to another area. It's the beach that brings people here, not the roadways or the

palm trees."

The motion to approve the vehicular bridge was made by Vernon Prather with stipulations for further public and SRIA involvement. He included funding, operations and maintenance in his motion which passed with five votes.

"This board can conceptually approve this plan but remain an active part of the design review process," he said. "I would like the County to fully explore all funding possibilities since I am not in favor of making the toll increase the only option. The SRIA should develop operational and maintenance cost estimates for what is being proposed."

Baskerville Donovan's Freddy Donovan noted that the County includes a time for review and public comment during the design phases of projects such as this.

The Board tackled the prioritization of other Master Plan projects after a request came from Escambia County Administrator Randy Oliver. The north entry and gateway project is at the top of the list followed by a north-south access road to the Bob Sikes fishing bridge, a walkable boardwalk connecting the core area, east and west streetscape and pedestrian connections, and the east entry

gateway.

The Master Plan recommendations will be discussed by the Board of County Commissioners at the Committee of the Whole, March 8 at 9 a.m. The Commission meets in Board Chambers, Room 100, 221 Palafox Place.

Other business of the board included:

☐ A settlement agreement with Five Flags Tourism Group to pay \$9041 in fees due for DeLuna Fest 2010. An audit showed a discrepancy of \$21,789 in revenues.

☐ Engineer Mike Langston, BDI, reported the Via de Luna median landscaping may be taken over by Escambia County. The funding which was dedicated to the project for bidding and administrative tasks could then be re-allocated into design. The board approved this 5 to 0.

☐ Thatched roof, tiki style palapas will be located at island trolley stops this season. Bids are being accepted from potential vendors.

☐ The Beach Ball water tower will be repaired and painted in April. Tank Pro was the low bidder.

The next SRIA meeting is Wednesday, February 22 at 5 p.m. The meetings are open to the public.

Beach Leaseholders May Apply For Homestead Exemption

Pensacola Beach leaseholders have been assessed ad valorem taxes upon both their improvements and land this year. Litigation is ongoing between the County taxing authorities and the leaseholders.

Until such time as the court rules in the case, the leaseholders are not compelled to pay their taxes. However, interest does accrue on the taxable amount.

Leaseholders who qualify may apply for a Homestead Exemption. Escambia County Property Appraiser Chris Jones said today the downtown property appraiser's office will be open Saturdays from 9 a.m. until noon through the March 1 deadline, for citizens wishing to file homestead tax exemption for 2012. The downtown office is on the third floor of the Escambia

County Courthouse, located at 221 Palafox Place.

"We want to provide as much convenience as possible for citizens who want to file for exemptions," he said.

If a home was purchased before January 1, 2012 and it is a primary residence, homestead exemption should be filed by March 1, 2012. Citizens can also file exemptions at the main office Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m.

"It's something every homeowner should take advantage of," Jones said. "Homestead exemption can reduce the taxable value of a residence by as much as \$50,000."

Renewal notices for existing Escambia County homestead residents have already been mailed. Owners with new residential

property or owners transferring ("porting") their prior homestead benefit should file for the exemption by March 1.

The documentation required to file homestead exemption is:

- Evidence of home ownership.
- Social Security number of applicant and spouse, if applicable.
- Proof of Florida residency such as a Florida driver's license, Florida vehicle registration, Florida voter registration and other information that will prove residency.

Anyone 65 or older or who is disabled may qualify for additional exemptions.

For more information, please call the Property Appraiser's Office at 434-2735 or go online to www.escpa.org.



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Male: The portrayed character appears intimidating but helpful; very muscular build; dark features; age 25-50.

Female: The portrayed character has a strong, poised, witty and intelligent personality; dark hair and toned build; age 18-30.

Female: The portrayed character is strong and sassy; Light colored hair; 18-30.

Male: The portrayed character is wise and calm, and appears as a mix between Robin Hood and a retired military man; muscular build; age 25-50.

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