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## Jekyll Authority sensitive to public input

By ERIC GARVEY  
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The Jekyll Island State Park Authority is not accustomed to making headlines or stirring up controversy. Most of our work here involves things like protecting sea turtle nests, preserving historic sites, serving conventioners, taking care of vacation guests and maintaining some of the country's most natural and pristine beaches.

But since last fall, when the authority chose a private revitalization partner to assist us in redeveloping the central area of the island, a small number of vocal critics have raised questions and, frankly, have spread misinformation about the authority's efforts and its mission.

The General Assembly created the authority in 1950 to manage Jekyll Island, a state-owned coastal treasure to be enjoyed by all Georgians. Each day we work hard to be trustworthy stewards, conserving the island's vast natural and cultural resources through the use of revenues generated by providing services, programs and amenities that maximize benefits to everyone on the island.

To accomplish our mission, we must attract visitors to Jekyll Island each year and generate enough revenue to keep state taxpayers from paying the substantial cost of running the island.

Faced with lagging attendance and declining revenue, the authority launched an effort to revitalize its aging hotels, shops and convention center. Because most of the structures were built in the 1960s, it was clear that the change was going to involve a great amount of redevelopment. The authority is not a real estate developer, and it made good sense to find a high-quality private partner to help us.

In September, the authority concluded a public Request for Proposal by selecting Georgia-based Linger Longer Communities as our revitalization partner. In its proposal, Linger Longer presented a beach village concept that would create a wonderful new destination on the island.

Understandably, there have been questions about the revitalization, but there are a number of key facts that the public should know:

\* The beach village proposal is a concept plan. This is not a final plan, and public input is being used to change and enhance it. The authority, working with Linger Longer, will take as much time as needed to ensure we have a plan that limits impact on the natural environment, returns reasonable revenue to the authority and best serves the people of Georgia.

\* The beach village concept plan is contained, for the most part, to previously developed areas, where the aging convention center and strip shopping center sit. It covers less than 2 percent of the island, and our final plan will improve both the view and access to this beach area.

\* There are no plans to build on the beach. All construction will be behind the natural sand dunes and will comply with Georgia's Shoreline Protection laws.

\* The beach village will be a model for environmentally sensitive development, using Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and EarthCraft standards for all new construction. Jekyll Island will be the first coastal area to do this.

\* The authority has repeatedly committed to making sure that Jekyll Island (including the new beach village) will remain affordable and accessible to all Georgians.

The beach village plan was recently discussed in a series of public meetings throughout Georgia. Linger Longer and authority representatives have been touring the state talking with civic groups and environmental organizations, as well as many Jekyll Island and Georgia residents in their homes.

The authority's board of directors and the Jekyll Legislative Oversight Committee have also held public sessions, the most recent on Jan. 15 at the state Capitol. The bulk of these meetings have been dedicated to hearing public feedback.

Our critics, though vocal, are a minority. Many people across the state, from business leaders to island residents to regular guests, support the plan to enhance the offerings on Jekyll Island.

While recently in Brunswick, Gov. Sonny Perdue gave strong words of support for Jekyll Island's revitalization. The Legislative Oversight Committee, including its leaders, Senate Majority Leader Tommie Williams and House Majority Leader Jerry Keen, also have commended the progress to date.

The Glynn County Commission has publicly endorsed the plans, as has the Brunswick/Golden Isles Chamber of Commerce. The Tourism Development Alliance of Georgia voted to support Jekyll Island revitalization, and meeting planners from around the state have committed more than \$25 million in new business if the plans progress.

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Over the past 15 years, Georgians have voted with their wallets — by not coming to Jekyll Island as they used to, instead spending their beach vacations in other states. That silent, but powerful, vote demonstrates a need for change.

Based on public input that we continue to receive, the authority, with Linger Longer, is making revisions to its plans, and we expect to release a revised version this spring. The revised concept will again welcome an additional round of public comment and review.

In addition, we will continue to welcome all Georgians to Jekyll Island, care for sea turtles and restore our historic sites. And to help provide ongoing facts, we will post updated information at [www.jekyllislandfacts.com](http://www.jekyllislandfacts.com).

— Eric Garvey is senior director of marketing and business development at the Jekyll Island State Park Authority.

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