



The Birmingham News

Baker building big in Baldwin

The Wharf features shops, condos, marina, Ferris wheel while Blackwater will offer upscale waterfront homes.

Sunday, November 05, 2006

MICHAEL TOMBERLIN
News staff writer

BALDWIN COUNTY -- The Birmingham developer behind Patton Creek, Wildwood and other shopping centers is creating two of the largest resort projects ever built near Alabama's Gulf Coast.

AIG Baker Shopping Center Properties is well into construction of The Wharf at Orange Beach, a 220-acre development with a mix of more than 1 million square feet of retail and restaurant space, 1,600 condos, a hotel, a 208-slip marina, a 10,200-seat amphitheater and a 112-foot Ferris wheel. The resort is anchored by a private clubhouse and will include pools and nature trails.

AIG Baker's next Baldwin County project - which has not been formally announced - is equally ambitious.

The project, called Blackwater, will be a 3,400-acre development on woodlands about a dozen miles north of The Wharf. The property will have retail, restaurant and hotel projects along with some small office buildings.

But the focus of Blackwater is on the 1,600 homes that will range from \$200,000 to \$2 million.

The Wharf:

More than 60 shops and restaurants have already signed on for the main retail section of The Wharf. A 15-screen Rave Motion Picture theater has opened. Galati Yacht Sales will have a dealership at the marina.

Owners of the famed Tipitina's in New Orleans will bring a Voodoo's club to the development. An Acme Oyster House will join several other restaurants serving burgers to pizza to Mexican to sushi.

The shops are a mix of national fashion retailers and homegrown shops.

"We could have filled it up with national stores but what makes The Wharf different are the local stores," said Jeff Rouzie, associate director of leasing with AIG Baker.

The condos are being built in different towers, the largest of which is the 11-story Levin's Bend, which overlooks the marina and intracoastal waterway.

The 109 condos in the building sold out in less than 24 hours, with 350 would-be buyers trying to pick up one of the units, AIG Baker officials said.

Alex Baker, president of AIG Baker, envisions guests coming in and renting a room in the resort or traveling up the waterway and docking at the marina. Wives can spend time at the Aveda Spa while husbands charter fishing trips and return with their catch, which is handed to the chef at the Armada Club for a dinner at the restaurant that evening.

"This is meant to be all-inclusive," he said. "You shouldn't have to leave the property for anything, unless you just want to."

Blackwater:

The same idea is behind the Blackwater project.

The Perdido and Blackwater rivers come together at the site, giving access to the Gulf. Reeder Lake and another lake on the site combined with planned manmade lakes to be added to the property will give it 15 miles of waterfront sites.

Plans for Blackwater call for more of a traditional village combined with a sportsman's retreat.

The retail portion will include an outfitter store. There will be horse riding trails and kayaking "trails" along with hunting lands and other outdoor activities. A chapel, post office and lakeside lodge and restaurant are part of Blackwater's plans.

"This is meant to be unlike any development this area has seen," Baker said. "It is a lot of land, but it is developed with the land as the centerpiece of the development."

Several old live oaks dot the property. Some trees and plants are being dug up and transplanted off where the roads are expected to run through the property.

Much of the property is wetlands that will never see development.

"This is a special piece of property," said Rob Drum, heading up the Blackwater development for AIG Baker.

Site work on the project could start this year. Once roads and other infrastructure is in place, construction on some of the buildings could start in early 2007. On the Web: www.thewharfal.com
www.blackwateral.com

E-mail: mtomberlin@bhamnews.com

© 2006 The Birmingham News

© 2006 al.com All Rights Reserved.