



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - Jan. 21, 2007

With New Bypass, Owl's Head Moves Closer to the Beach

By: Alan Rosenberg

FREEPORT, Fla.-- Owl's Head is now closer to the beach.

It's not magic or an optical illusion. And the plates below the earth's surface haven't shifted, at least not enough to make a measurable difference.

But it's absolutely true, says Shelton Stone, General Manager of Owl's Head Development at Freeport. With the opening of the new 5.7-mile stretch of Hwy 331—bypassing the current “downtown” area of Freeport—the route to the beach is now 1.4 miles and several minutes shorter.

Previously, motorists traveling south on U.S. Hwy 331 had to jog left at State Road 20, navigate a mile through the busy commercial area and two busy intersections, then turn right to rejoin the highway.

“Now, it's a straight shot,” says Stone. “Not only that, the scenery on both sides of the road is prettier.”

Owl's Head is just one of many businesses on the Coastal Inland Heights and beyond that can expect to benefit from the opening of the new road, according to Dawn Moliterno, president and CEO of the Walton County Chamber of Commerce, who describes the change as a “win, win, win,” for tourists, local businesses and area residents.

“It really does help everybody when you can reduce traffic congestion and confusion,” Moliterno says. And, by eliminating the one-mile jog on State Road 20 for north- and south-bound traffic, the accident rate can be expected to drop.

“It not only helps tourists reach their destinations quicker and safer, it surely will improve the quality of life for the residents of Freeport and the entire Coastal Inland Heights.”

Kasey Cuchens, a member of the Chamber's Freeport Area Council, believes the change will give an overall boost to the business community.

“We know this will change the dynamic,” says Cuchens, who acknowledges the concerns of a few business owners that reduced traffic flow may have a negative impact. But, she adds, by diverting thru-traffic from the business district, the new road “will open Freeport up for those of us who live and do business here.”

In the past, traffic congestion on busy summer and holiday weekends would even discourage locals from heading to the Freeport area shops.

County Commissioner Sara Comander is encouraged by the opportunities the road change presents for her District 4 constituents.

“I feel strongly that every community needs a downtown area,” says Commander. “And now, for the first time, Freeport will have the opportunity to develop a more defined and strengthened downtown area.

“I think this will do nothing but enhance the community.”

Owl’s Head, of course, is particularly well-positioned to benefit, says Stone, since more than a mile of the new highway passes through Owl’s Head property.

“For the first time, people driving through will truly experience how large Owl’s Head truly is. We’ve all joked about towns so small you’d miss them if you blinked. Well, to miss seeing Owl’s Head, you’d have to keep your eyes closed for a full minute or more. We’re going to be a large part of this new landscape.”

The opening of the new stretch of highway is also a “huge marketing plus for us,” says Stone, referring to the proximity of 331 to the Owl’s Head “front door.”

The Welcome Center had been purposely constructed just a few paces off the southbound lane in anticipation of the Bypass opening, and Elderberry, the new community’s first street is accessed directly across the way.

“When we started, we were compelled to have two front doors,” says Stone, “one for the present, the other for the future. And, thankfully, the future is here and we couldn’t be happier. No one driving by can miss us now.”

Stone’s vision is that beach-bound families from Atlanta, Birmingham, Nashville and other points north will come to see Owl’s Head as a landmark.

“It will be the place where Mom and Dad can finally tell the kids, ‘We’re here, we’ve arrived. We can slow down now and maybe we can stop.’” A year-round Farmers Market planned beside the Welcome Center is expected to provide an incentive for families to get out, stretch their legs and help realize Stone’s vision.

Before the new highway opened, the Welcome Center, tucked a couple of hundred yards from the current 331 at the end of a driveway, didn’t make much of an impression on passing motorists. “That was the reason we posted that 70-foot tall flag pole as close to the road as we could,” says Stone. In addition, extensive landscaping between the old road and the Center—including dozens of live oak trees-- served as a beckoning welcome mat.

Now that the old road is history, the live oaks will be transplanted to adorn the streets of the growing neighborhoods. And what about the flag? Stone says he wrestled with the question for quite a while before coming up with the perfect place:

“We’re going to use it to mark the location of the future Owl’s Head Town Center,” he says. “It will be a great reference point when folks are traveling around the property.”