

## **New airport could mean big changes for Forgotten Coast**

**By MELISSA NELSON**  
**The Associated Press**

MEXICO BEACH, Fla. — Marilyn Theus peddles costume jewelry, chipped china plates and other “junktiques” on the roadside between Port St. Joe and Mexico Beach. On Tuesdays she’s joined by a friend who markets fresh shrimp from the site overlooking the turquoise waters of St. Joseph’s Bay. The vendors are part of the local charm of Florida’s Forgotten Coast, which stretches along the Gulf of Mexico from Mexico Beach to about 100 miles east to St. Mark’s. Mom and pop motels, bait shops and undeveloped beaches dot the coast south of the Apalachicola National Forest.

But a new \$330 million international airport, pushed by The St. Joe Co. and political leaders over the objection of environmentalists, is scheduled to open in early 2010 on a 4,000-acre site north of Panama City. It could mean big changes for these quiet oyster and shrimping towns, long bypassed by tourists.

Formed by the duPont family to harvest timber for paper products in the 1930s, The St. Joe Co. is now a developer that owns some 700,000 acres of undeveloped Florida land mostly in the Panhandle, making it the state’s largest private landowner. St. Joe donated the 4,000 acres to relocate Panama City’s existing airport and owns 78,000 acres of undeveloped property surrounding the new airport.

Along The Forgotten Coast, the state — with the help of a land donation from the St. Joe Co. — recently rerouted four miles of U.S. 98, the major east-west coastal highway, to improve the traffic flow in the area and make way for development. High-end vacation homes began replacing motels and RV parks a decade ago. In sleepy Port Saint Joe, trendy interior decorating stores have opened near the local Piggly Wiggly.

“We aren’t forgotten anymore,” said Brad Hart, a commercial painter who has lived in the area for 30 years. The national mortgage crisis has slowed the bulldozers and construction cranes, but building continues. The airport has withstood legal challenges from environmentalists, a local pilots group and others who have argued it is unnecessary and will destroy environmentally sensitive wetlands. The lawsuits continue, but the future of the new airport — the first since Sept. 11, 2001 — appears increasingly certain to both supporters and opponents.

“We did our battle and we were unsuccessful,” said Fred Werner, a Panama City pharmacist and amateur pilot whose organization, Friends of PFN — the FAA’s designation for the existing Panama City airport — sued to block the new airport. Werner objects to the airport as a “corporate welfare scheme,” which he says will benefit the company in future decades by ensuring tourists easy access to the region. The project will also force tax dollars be spent extending roads, sewer lines and other infrastructure to St. Joe-owned properties surrounding the airport, he said.

“It’s not an aviation deal, it’s a land development deal,” he said. Proponents of the airport relocation, including the St. Joe Co., argue the existing airport’s runways are restricted by St. Andrews Bay, that it’s vulnerable to flooding in tropical storms and hurricanes, and that the area needs a larger, regional airport capable of handling international flights for long-term growth.

Despite the lawsuits, Randy Curtis, the airport’s executive director, said it appears the construction schedule is on track for the new airport to open in early 2010. St. Joe Chairman Peter Rummell said the airport is key in the company’s long-term strategy to maximize the potential of its vast northwest Florida land holdings. “Despite all the stories, the state’s population is still expected to increase by 10 percent over the next two decades. For now, Florida’s real estate markets remain very weak, but we believe in Florida’s long-term future and Joe’s long-term ability to create value,” he said in a conference call to discuss the company’s sluggish fourth quarter earnings.

On a recent Friday afternoon, campers played horseshoes at the El Governor RV Park in Mexico Beach. Their motor homes were parked on a vacant lot overlooking the white-sand beach and turquoise waters stretching below the nearby El Governor Hotel. But campground manager Jerry Metz fears beachfront camping is part of a bygone era.

"You never know what the economy is going to do, but I'm assuming it will go up and then all of this stuff is going to sell," he said, sweeping his hand toward nearby vacation home and condominium projects.

These aren't the high-rise condos of Panama City Beach. They are homier and built in the local architectural style using a clapboard design with brick driveways and white picket fences. They are designed to appeal to a wealthier market than the traditional Panama City Beach crowd. "Finding a place to park an RV along the Forgotten Coast isn't as easy as it used to be," said Metz, who estimates there are only two or three such places left in the region.

"The Forgotten Coast will soon become just like Panama City Beach," he said. Camper Walter Pumphrey enjoyed riding his Harley-Davidson along the winding beachfront highway with breathtaking ocean views. But the highway has been rerouted around Windmark, a vacation home development under construction by the St. Joe Co. Motorists now drive through a thick pine forest until they reach the town of Port St. Joe, but plans call for an additional section of highway to be rerouted and bypass Mexico Beach.

"They are taking beauty out it, it's hard to explain but nothing is the same," Pumphrey said. But St. Joe Co. spokesman Jerry Ray said the company wants to preserve the Forgotten Coast's character. "That atmosphere is what people are coming down for and we don't want to destroy that," he said. "We cannot lose this character, this feeling of local color, it's one of the assets we have." And the airport?

"More people cannot enjoy the beauty of the Forgotten Coast if they cannot access the region," Ray said. "Right now, only 8 percent of the people that come to these beautiful beaches are flying. Millions of people come down here every year, but most of them drive," Ray said. "What (the airport) means over the long, long term is that this is a market place that will broaden."

**IF YOU GO:**

More information about Florida's Forgotten Coast: [www.forgottencoastline.com](http://www.forgottencoastline.com).