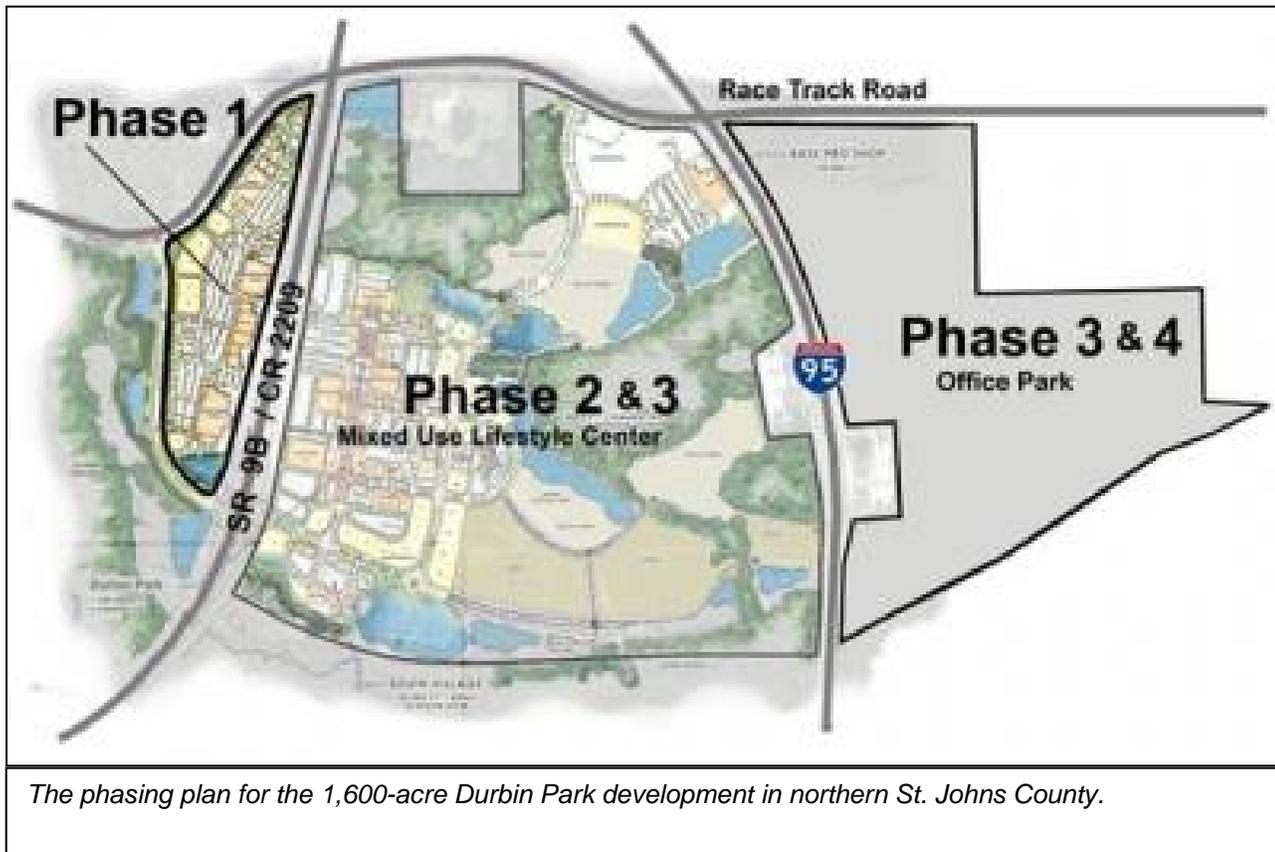


First phase of Durbin Park could open in 2018

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By Karen Brune Mathis, Managing Editor



The phasing plan for the 1,600-acre Durbin Park development in northern St. Johns County.

By next year this time, ground should be broken and likely some tenants announced for the first phase of the 1,600-acre Durbin Park in northern St. Johns County, expected to bring jobs, stores and services to area residents.

"It's huge," said Geneva Henderson, executive vice president of Lat Purser & Associates in Jacksonville and a retail property manager and broker.

Durbin Park is designed for about 2.4 million square feet of retail space, 2.8 million square feet of office space, 999 multifamily housing units and about 350 hotel rooms. The full project is planned over four phases. Build-out could take 20 years, but the first phase of 80 acres could open in the first quarter of 2018.

The total retail space is almost twice the size of St. Johns Town Center.

“It’s finally happening,” said Frank Gatlin III, whose Gatlin Development Co. Inc. is a partner in Durbin Park with Gate Petroleum Co. Gatlin Development is a retail developer and a real estate investment company. Gatlin said he and Gate anticipate “bringing many services and restaurants and uses that St. Johns County is missing.”

Count jobs, too. Melissa Glasgow, economic development director for St. Johns County, said Wednesday that Durbin Park will generate jobs throughout the project. And the office park will position Durbin for targeted industries, especially corporate headquarters.

“The interest that I’ve heard about represents several companies and several thousand jobs,” she said, guarding her comments to avoid speculation about which companies might be looking.

Jacksonville-based Gate and Gatlin announced plans Wednesday for Durbin Park, along Interstate 95 at the Florida 9B/County Road 2209 interchange under construction. The project includes a long-announced Bass Pro Shops and hundreds of acres of stores, housing, hotels, offices and entertainment in one of the largest developments in Northeast Florida.

“Unique to Northeast Florida, Durbin Park will be a distinct destination where individuals and families can live, work, shop and be entertained all within a park-like setting,” said Gate President John Peyton in a news release.

Gate said Durbin Park is one of the largest, most diversified mixed-use developments in Northeast Florida. The company owns the land.

“There’s a lot of energy right now focused on St. Johns County that can bring positive constructive growth to the area residents while making substantial contributions to the county’s financial resources,” said Ken Wilson, president of GL National, a division of Gate.

Gatlin will lead the retail development as Gate’s joint venture partner. The first phase is an 80-acre parcel west of the interchange. Gatlin said clearing and grubbing could start by the end of the year and the full groundbreaking could be in the first quarter next year.

It will include about 700,000 square feet of retail space anchored by at least three big-box retailers, described as a home-improvement center, membership club and department store. Plans also show a Gate convenience store. Gatlin declined to identify the tenants pending corporate approval from them.

In January, Gatlin said he was targeting a discount department store and the home improvement center and membership club for 450,000 square feet of space. The remaining space was for restaurants, small shops and outparcels. At that time, he estimated a first-phase investment of \$125 million. He said Wednesday there would be about 150,000 square feet of junior anchor stores, ranging from 15,000 to 50,000 square feet. There also would be smaller shops for tenants such as hair salons, ice cream shops, small clothing stores and other food, goods and services.

Glasgow said residents are interested in retail development so they don’t have to drive to Jacksonville for all of their shopping. “People love being able to shop in their neighborhoods,” she said.

Gatlin said that was a goal. “We are going to do everything in our power to bring all the services they need,” he said about the growing population in the northern part of the county.

Bass Pro Shops will be in the second phase, planned east of the interchange and next to I-95. The store announced in 2012 it would open a Bass Pro Shop Outdoor World by mid-2014, but that was delayed.

The second and part of the third phase will be an approximately 1.5-million-square-foot lifestyle center with stores, a theater, commercial space, multifamily development and a 150,000-square-foot Bass Pro Shops. That should follow the first phase by a year to 18 months.

Wilson said the lifestyle community will include high-end retailers, hotels, residential and office space in an urban-style design. It will provide more services close to workers and residents for their convenience. Plans also show signature restaurants, a woodland preserve and an entertainment area with a theater, an event lawn with a video wall and a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round.

The rest of the third phase and the fourth will be an office park. The property could be sold, leased or joint-venture developed, Gate said. The company said it will discuss phases, including their names, in greater detail in the coming months.

The Shopping Center Group will be the leasing agent for the retail space. The group represents many area retail developments, including the Town Center Promenade near St. Johns Town Center. Gate said the design is a landscape of extensive green space, walking trails, lakes and family entertainment offerings.

Gatlin Development was founded by Gatlin. He and his son, principal Frankie Gatlin IV, moved its headquarters to Jacksonville a year ago from South Florida.

“In my 40 years in the development industry, I have never seen a project with as much potential as Durbin Park,” Gatlin said in the release.

Wilson said Gate and Gatlin are applying for zoning and engineering. He said in working with the Florida Department of Transportation and St. Johns County, their joint goal is to open the first phase of Durbin Park the day the new interchange opens.

The interchange is scheduled for completion in summer 2018. It connects northwest St. Johns County to I-95. County Road 2209 is St. Johns Parkway.

Within Durbin, the main street of Peyton Parkway will circle throughout the property and tie onto Race Track Road. Of the 1,600 acres, about 600 could be developed for building sites. The remainder is lake, wetlands, road right-of-way and green space.

“The question mark that looms in our economic market adds urgency to our efforts,” Wilson said. He said no one involved “wants to miss the rewards of this economic cycle.”

Gate was founded in 1960 by Herbert H. Peyton. The current president is his son. Gate’s diversified industries include retail convenience stores in four states, fleet and fuel services, real estate, hospitality and construction materials.

Gatlin, founded in 1976, is privately held with experience in residential, hotel and retail shopping center developments. It has developed more than 20 million square feet of retail shopping space across the country.

Area projects include five area Walmart Neighborhood Markets and Collins Plaza, anchored by Walmart Supercenter.

Wilson said the first phase of Durbin Park is “only a small beginning” of what could resemble Gate’s efforts with Deerwood Park in Southside and the resulting growth that followed.

While Durbin Park could bring retail stores closer to shoppers in St. Johns County, it also could keep them from patronizing shopping centers in Duval.

One center that could be affected is The Avenues mall, an enclosed center built in 1990 at Philips Highway, Southside Boulevard and I-95.

It already competes with the nearby St. Johns Town Center, whose first phase opened in 2005. The open-air lifestyle center attracted many exclusive retailers to Northeast Florida.

“I think The Avenues will really have to reinvent itself,” Henderson said