

Could St. Johns County be Getting its Own Version of the St. Johns Town Center?

By Derek Gilliam
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Imagine the St. Johns Town Center spread over 1,600 acres with lakes and trees and nature trails surrounding big box retailers, high-end restaurants and entertainment businesses.

That is long-time developer Frank Gatlin's vision for Durbin Lakes in northern St. Johns County. The development is owned by Jacksonville-based Gate Petroleum Co. and the two have teamed up to build 600,000 square-feet of commercial space for the first phase of a massive development in Northern St. Johns County.

Out of the 1,600 acres, Gatlin said that 1,000 acres will be left as wetlands, trees, lakes and open space.

"It's going to be like having a town center inside a park with lakes, trees and nature paths and sidewalks," he said.

That first phase is estimated to cost \$125 million, Gatlin said. The four phases of the development could reach about \$500 million, he said.

Durbin Lakes could eventually build 2.4 million square feet of retail space, 2.8 million square feet of office space, 999 multifamily units and a hotel as the St. Johns County government has pledged development rights.

Gatlin said the Durbin Lakes will be the first off ramp after Interstate 9B crosses over Interstate 95.

The 9B project is currently under construction and will extend south from Interstate 295 into St. Johns County ending at Racetrack Road.

Gatlin said the 9B off ramp will drop right into the Durbin Lakes development where residents will be welcomed with hundreds of thousands of square feet of retail space.

He said the big-box stores that he plans to build first at the development will be a home improvement center, a discount department store and a membership club.

Those stores should be a welcome boon for the home construction boom that's happening in northern St. Johns County and will act as an engine for future development attracting people to the area that will want to shop and eat.

He said the other plans for the first phase of the project call for 150,000 square feet of restaurants and retailers.

He said as after phase one, the area will be validated as a commercial hub and allow for quick growth in the future.

Another catalyst for the development is the Bass Pro Shop. He said after that gets completed, which will be near the Gate property against Interstate 95, things start to get interesting as development of more entertainment options like movie theaters become more plausible.

However, the development depends on the progress of 9B. Currently, that highway project is planned to be constructed by the first quarter of 2018, Gatlin said.

Construction could should start in the first quarter of 2017 with 2016 being used for planning and leasing, he said.

Gatlin moved the headquarters of his development company Gatlin Development Group from Fort Lauderdale to Jacksonville about six months ago. He said all the development activity was a pleasant surprise, but the The Baton Rouge native said he had looked at several other locations before settling on Jacksonville for its southern hospitality.

"I feel like I had to move 300 miles north to get to the south," he said.