

# Lake Lanier resort banks on renovations to draw visitors

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It's summer at Lake Lanier, and despite the state's ongoing drought, there is a buzz in the air.

And a hammer's knock, a drill's whiz and a nailgun's clap.

Lake Lanier Island Resort, the sprawling 1,100-acre North Georgia vacation and convention getaway, is getting a \$200 million to \$300 million makeover that its operators hope will bring in more visitors when the work is complete in the next five to seven years. Officials want to double and maybe triple the 7,000 to 8,000 cars that pass through yearly and make the property a destination for the lucrative convention business, said Grier Todd, the resort's chief operating officer.

Long operated by the state, Lake Lanier Island Resort's rejuvenation is in the hands of Gwinnett County businessman Virgil Williams and his family. The Williams family, which agreed to lease the property in August 2005, will pay the state a percentage of proceeds from the resort's operations.

But first there is work to be done, Todd said. The family is spending \$35 million on infrastructure repairs, including work to the 30-year-old physical plant and on the area's 35-year-old roads. They are even putting in sidewalks.

"There are 1,100 acres out here, and there were no sidewalks," Todd said.

When finished, there will be roundabouts, bicycle trails, golf paths and separate golf-cart roads that are wide enough for two of the vehicles to pass comfortably.

Some changes already have been completed, Todd said. This past spring, crews completed the \$11 million remaking of Emerald Point Hotel and Conference Hotel into Legacy Lodge and Conference Center. The official relaunch of the property was held this month.

Designed to evoke comparisons to Grove Park Inn and lodges in Yellowstone National Park, the 221-room facility will help Lake Lanier grab more of the lucrative convention business that has been going to competitors like Chateau Élan and Evergreen Conference Resort at Stone Mountain Park, Todd said.

"Before the renovations, we didn't stack up as well," Todd said. "Now, I think we are in a better position. We have a newer product and the lake."

That's critical in this down economy, said Stephanie Orr, the resort's director of sales and marketing. Hotel occupancy across metro Atlanta and, indeed, the country has fallen off because there are fewer business travelers, conventioners and tourists.

Business at the lodge is off about 5.5 percent compared with last year, a figure that could be worse were it not for the renovation, Orr said. The property's competitors are down about 16 percent.

The renovated hotel, she said, is breathtaking. It has wood shake siding, floors that combine African slate and wood plank and rooms with granite counter tops and flat panel TVs.

"Emerald Point was something that was near and dear to the heart of Georgians," she said. "It was a nice hotel, but it doesn't have the feel that we have now. This is quite amazing. Everything has been redone."

The hotel is not the only building getting a new look. Each of the six legacy villas is getting \$1 million in renovations, and the area's golf courses won't be far behind. Tranquility the Spa will help complete the package in making the resort a destination, Todd said.

"We spent about a year, year and a half in the planning process," Todd said of the work. " '09, to us, is looking very strong."

The big challenge is letting people know that the drought has not affected the resort as much as people think, Todd said.

"There is still water in the lake," he said. "We've just got a lot more beach. We've been more affected by the road construction than by the lake levels."