

## PRESS-REGISTER

### Wharf convention space approved

**Mixed-use development hopes to add meeting hall by next summer**

Thursday, August 07, 2008

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Staff Reporter

ORANGE BEACH — The City Council notched a point in its quest to score notice with the convention business Tuesday, approving The Wharf's plans for a 27,000-square-foot meeting facility.

The Wharf hopes to open the facility, which will be built so that its size can double if demand warrants, by next summer, said Jim Lawson, the city's community development director.

"I think it's going to help the city tremendously, not just in the (summer) season but in the shoulder season when we all need the business," Blalock said. "We've always had a lack of proper facilities when it comes to conventions and the big expositions and things like that.

"While this may not be the one big one that we need, it will go a long way to solving some of our problems on meeting space, and I'm excited for it."

AIG Baker owns the 220-acre development.

The company had originally asked Orange Beach to partner with it on the project through a 15-year revenue sharing deal. That pact was abandoned, however, and The Wharf will build the facility without taxpayer investment, City Administrator Ken Grimes said.

"It's definitely going to fill a void that we've been talking about for years, even to the point where the city was looking at building a civic center which grew into a convention center," Grimes said.

Beginning in late 2005, the council began asking architectural firms about a civic center that could host anything from business conventions to community plays and graduation ceremonies. Elected officials later deemed that the project would be too expensive for the city to fund in the current economic climate.

If it is built as planned, The Wharf will one day include more than 1 million square feet of retail space, about 1,000 hotel rooms and condo units, a marina, a 15-screen movie theater, 10,200-seat amphitheater and a 112-foot Ferris wheel.

The convention center, planned for The Wharf's northwest corner, will quickly be put to use.

AIG Baker wrote in its application to city planners that it has negotiated a lease with Birmingham-based Student Life Inc. for the group, which operates retreats and ministry events for Christian students, to use the building from May 15 to August 15 each year.

"The camps scheduled for The Wharf in 2009 are expected to draw over 30,000 students over the three-month period that Student Life leases the multi-use facility," AIG Baker wrote in its application.

When not used by Student Life, the facility will be marketed to meeting and convention organizers as well as being available to large local groups, be they Mardi Gras societies or graduating classes, who need a big space, Grimes said.

The facility will consist mostly of a single 18,600-square-foot exhibition hall with movable seating, audio/visual equipment, a warming kitchen and loading docks, according to Grimes and the application. The city administrator said the facility should be able to accommodate about 3,000 people.

City officials said they had some reservations about the building's aesthetics, but those worries were wiped away when The Wharf agreed to an extensive landscaping plan.

"It appears that they have done everything that we've asked them to do and a little more," Councilwoman Joni Blalock said.