



What Do We Want Myrtle Beach To Be

This op-ed was written in advance of the November 6, 2007 city council election in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The op-ed was submitted to *The Sun News* but was not selected for publication.

Every round of local elections brings new ideas and proposals. However, as is so often the case, the candidates lack true long-term vision and evade talking about the real issues that will define the future of Myrtle Beach and Horry County.

First off, relations between Horry County Council and Myrtle Beach City Council have reached the lowest point in years. As I advocated when I ran for the Horry County Council District 2 seat in 2006, our local officials, both city and county, need to begin the difficult process of reconciliation that is desperately needed in order to collectively move our area forward for the future. Let us put the bitterness and division of the airport debacle behind us and commit ourselves to working together for the common good of the people and to meet those challenges that lie ahead.

As we assess the future, we must put our minds together to decide what we want our area to be. We are at a crossroad. We can continue down one path and be forever known as the Redneck Riviera. Or we can take another path that has been offered to us—an upscale resort area that is world renowned for its beaches, golf, entertainment, and culture. The foundation for this has been laid these last few years through successive upscale developments. Only one path will bring us the respect and reputation associated with other world class, leading vacation destinations—respect that we once had in days long ago when the Ocean Forest was one of the most luxurious and lavish resorts in the South. We can be so much more than we are, and we can restore that lost sense of grandeur. But to reach our full potential, we must first break through an ingrained mindset of inferiority that is holding us back and that has been ubiquitous in our local society for decades.

But how do we accomplish being all that we can be and in the process position ourselves far ahead of Virginia Beach and Nags Head as the premier beach destination? Myrtle Beach has long been criticized for lacking culture. In the last few years, there have been renewed efforts to bring more cultural events here. The success of the art museum and the efforts to further performing arts in our

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PO Box 6895
Myrtle Beach, SC 29572
www.ThinkingOutsideTheBoxe.com



community are admirable endeavours. Proposals to build a cultural arts centre with a Sydney-like opera house would help fulfill efforts to bring culture here. There is no reason why a venue such as this would not attract major Broadway productions such as *The Phantom of the Opera* year round. This would certainly help to bring additional visitors in the traditionally slower winter months. The success of *Cats* at the Palace Theatre a decade ago should dispel any doubts about the ability to attract and sell out well-known productions. But more than Broadway productions, this venue would provide an outlet for large scale touring art and historical exhibits and other major events such as presidential debates.

Once we have made substantial progress in establishing ourselves in this manner, we may be able to attract a professional golf tournament or tennis event. The Grand Strand has some of the best courses in the Southeast, and there is no reason we should not be able to host a recognized event once our image improves sufficiently and we begin to earn more respect. The Presidential debates in January 2008 will go a long way in increasing the Grand Strand's exposure nationally. The efforts of those who worked hard for us to secure these events should be commended. This exposure along with continued marketing initiatives by the Chamber of Commerce will further build awareness of Myrtle Beach and our image as a first class golf and tennis destination.

But to be first class we also need a first class mass transportation system. Vast improvements have been made with Coast RTA, but this is only part of what our community needs. Business leaders and elected officials should join together to explore and form public private partnerships (PPPs) to develop, build, and operate a monorail system connecting tourist centers, hotels, the convention center, the airport, the Hard Rock Park, Coastal Carolina University, etc. Las Vegas has had success with its monorail. Such a progressive system here would set us far ahead of other vacation destinations and fill a crucial public service void that has continually haunted this community.

As our image and reputation improve and as we make the necessary investment in projects that improve the quality of life, economic development will be greatly facilitated as we seek to diversify our jobs base from resort and tourism to other industries—manufacturing, information technology, aerospace/defense, financial services. Coastal Carolina University is a fine institution that produces great

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talent. With a more diversified employment and economic base, we greatly improve our chances of retaining graduating talent and attracting more talent in the future as opposed to seeing that talent flee the area to other locations that offer greater opportunities.

To be sure, there are other issues to be addressed—protecting our natural resources and green space and developing alternative parking schemes in the city before beachgoers encroach upon neighborhoods and reduce residents' quality of life. While the challenges ahead seem to be of lofty proportions, all change must begin somewhere and sometime. Myrtle Beach and Horry County have the potential and the opportunity to be so much more. Now is the time for open, honest, and constructive debate followed by firm, resolute action. Failing this, we will doom ourselves to be forever labeled a tacky, unrefined beach town.