

Rejecting Environmentalism in Orange Beach

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Rauf Bolden, Orange Beach

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The construction of the new Lodge in the Alabama State Park set the bar, specifying solar panels for power, recycling water from air conditioners, catching rainwater off the roof, and innovating in ways that reflect the environmental values of our local community. The Gulf State Park Lodge is a shining example, begging our local elected officials to wake up and smell the coffee.

Environmentally friendly technologies like solar panels; air conditioner water recycling and rainwater collection are viable, being easily incorporated into building sustainable technologies for the new Middle School/High School in Orange Beach. Unfortunately, the political will is not there.

By contrast, "The park is recognized as an international benchmark for environmental and economic sustainability," according to a report on Gulf State Park Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/GulfStatePark/posts/our-new-interpretive-center-is-so-unique-that-there-are-only-16-buildings-like-i/1568989403210461/>).

Broadening the sustainability equation, enveloping the City of Orange Beach will help the city's environmental image, simultaneously generating significant energy and water savings over time, re-paying the initial cost of adding renewable systems to the new school's construction. The Gulf State Park is leading the way.

The Lodge's sustainability profile provides an impressive example to follow:

"....It collects, stores and treats 105 percent of the water needed by guests and the surrounding landscape. It features an 11,000-gallon water cistern that stores rainwater collected from the building's roof.

....It is completely self-sufficient and will generate 105 percent of the power needed with solar panels placed at the site's southwest corner (This means the facility generates more energy than it uses.)," according to a report on Gulf State Park Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/GulfStatePark/posts/our-new-interpretive-center-is-so-unique-that-there-are-only-16-buildings-like-i/1568989403210461/>).

I argue, mandating FORTIFIED Homes and Commercial be built as energy and water efficient as they are hurricane resistant is crucial, minimizing the environmental impact on Orange Beach.

How did we get here?

"Hurricane Ivan made landfall in Gulf Shores on September 16, 2004 and devastated [the] Gulf State Park. This category III storm (categorized as one of the top five worst storms to make landfall on the Gulf Coast) broke the pier into three sections, washed out the bottom floors of the hotel, totaled one of the cabins, and flooded the majority of the park with salt water," according to a report on Alabama State Parks web site (<https://www.alapark.com/history-gulf-state-park>).

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Ivan required Orange Beach to re-evaluate new home and commercial builds, adopting the FORTIFIED Homes and Commercial criteria as their building codes, but no environmental sustainability amendments like solar panels and water recycling were included.

"We [The State Park Lodge] meet the highest standards for an environmentally sustainable hospitality and meeting experience and are seeking certification as a LEED Gold facility, FORTIFIED Commercial facility, and SITES Platinum landscape," according to a report on The Lodge's web site (<https://www.guestreservations.com/the-lodge-at-gulf-state-park-a-hilton-hotel/aboutthehotel?gclid=EA1aIQobChMIpKzY68PU4AIViJ6zCh3INAgOEAAAYASABEgJpHfD BwE>).

"With new trailheads and places to pause, along with interpretive and wayfinding [sic] signage along the way, it's ideal for enjoying the stunning natural beauty of Alabama's Gulf Coast. And it's accessible to all levels of physical ability. So park your car and leave it behind for unforgettable hikes of all types," according to a report on The Gulf State Park web site (<https://mygulfstatepark.com/>).

What appears to be environmental harmony in Orange Beach like trails and clean beaches makes the symphony incomplete without interconnected sustainability woven into the fabric of our local building codes.

The City of Orange Beach is singularly focused on the big picture, primarily its bottom line. The FORTIFIED Homes and Commercial standard provide reductions in insurance premiums for locals; but environmental sustainability does not.

Mayor Tony Kennon came away impressed with the new lodge, and its stout construction. "I think they did a first-class job," Kennon said in a report in the Lagniappe (<https://lagniappemobile.com/gulf-state-park-lodge-and-hilton-hotel-open/>). "It's a unique design but it's also built in such a way to be fortified to withstand storms and survive. So, I'm very proud of it."

He never disappoints, clearly implying FORTIFIED Homes and Commercial standards are important to him. I argue for a plan, demanding resource conservation measures like solar power and water recycling be incorporated into the city's FORTIFIED Homes and Commercial building codes, as environmental addendums.

When the Gulf State Park opened, the speeches were a master class on the Park's aspirations for the local community. Mayor Kennon entertained his friends, clearly not cheerleading these sustainability standards. I assume it was because there is no financial incentive in it for him.

A solar powered house in Orange Beach does not add more money into the city's general fund from the electrical cooperative's partnership with local government. Every year Baldwin EMC presents the City Council with a check for approximately \$1 Million, from coal generated power sold to local residents.

Alternatively, the Gulf State Park's sustainability statement suggests raising the standard of environmental ethics over monetary gain, "Environmentally friendly operations and facilities; support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage; direct and tangible social and economic benefits to local people," according to a report on The Lodge at Gulf State Park web site (<https://lodgeatgulfstatepark.com/about-us/>).

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On the face of it, Baldwin EMC and Orange Beach rail against adding solar homes and commercial, because it cuts into their margins.

According to documentation obtained in an email from Greg Gipson, Manager of Business Development, Energy Services, and Advanced Metering at Baldwin EMC, the electrical provider requires liability insurance and upgrade-payment guarantees from EMC's solar customers. This procedure insulates EMC's upstream suppliers from financial exposure by pushing additional expenses for solar connectivity down onto the solar users, according to EMC's "Members Guide to Interconnected Distributed Resource", pgs. 8-9.

"The Member (read: EMC customer) may be compensated for the power [on solar projects] that flows onto the distribution system," according to EMC's "Members Guide to Interconnected Distribution", pg. 7. This language is conspicuously vague as to if and how much credit is given for each watt of solar power generated.

The city's position is diametrically opposed to the environmental values espoused by the Alabama Gulf State Park. The Park calls for, "Direct and tangible social and economic benefits to local people," according to a report on The Lodge at Gulf State Park web site (<https://lodgeatgulfstatepark.com/about-us/>).

Elected officials in Orange Beach made a conscious choice about climate change, solar power, and water recycling by not following the State Park's example. Instead of insisting the new Middle School/High School be constructed using revised FORTIFIED Homes and Commercial building codes, running on solar power with recycled water as a precedent for sustainability, the Council decided to spend tens-of-millions on ball fields, and a performing-arts center, powered in the traditional way, perhaps by coal-fired power plants. It is an opportunity lost, affecting generations to come.

ENDS.

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