

Jacksonville Beach Restaurants Succumb to Multi Family Housing Boom

Just over a month after the First Street Grill's final New Years Eve bash, another popular eatery on the Intracoastal Waterway closes its doors for the last time on February 3rd. The Lighthouse Grill, located at the San Pablo River bridge on Beach Blvd. has been sold to Chase Properties, Inc., whose plan is to offer multifamily housing with Intracoastal access on the 2.4 acre waterfront site.

The new development, called Lighthouse Point, will consist of 37 townhouses designed in a West Indies tradition, and will sell from \$650,000 to 1.5 million. Residents will also have the opportunity to own a boat slip on the property.

After denying a proposal to construct an 80' high, 94 unit condominium on the property two years ago, the city of Jacksonville Beach approved this project as the buildings fall under the cities 35 foot height limit, a restriction passed overwhelmingly by voters in the 2004 election that has until now been seldom enforced.

The trend in Jacksonville Beach has been for developers to buy up large parcels of land, tear down the existing structures, and put up 7 to 10 story condominiums. As a result, many of the popular restaurants and night spots that helped define the character of Jacksonville Beach have disappeared.

The most recent casualty was the First Street Grille, an oceanfront eatery and gathering place at 7th Ave. North. First Street Grille closed on January 1st after hosting a huge new year's party attended by many local patrons of the establishment. First Street Grille will be fondly remembered for its excellent Florida cuisine, it's popular happy hours, and for the dancing behind the dunes to the tunes of live oldies bands.

A circuit judge ruled in October that the developer who owned the property, Lee Underwood, had vested rights in the parcel because his decision to purchase the land was based on the government's position about the properties present and future status. A similar case was decided on January 9th, allowing developer Scott Gay the go ahead for a 10 story condominium at 10th Ave and 1st Street. Several other property rights cases are currently pending in the courts.

Arising from the dust of the First Street Grille will be the Acquilus III, a seven story oceanfront condominium. Underwood also owns the property across the street on which the Dolphin Depot is located. An old two story beach house that was transformed into a restaurant, the Dolphin Depot is a popular upscale dining establishment with a very creative menu. According to the same judge that ruled on the First Street Grille property, the rights for this parcel are not vested. Nevertheless, one could safely assume that the Dolphin Depots days are also numbered.

In early 2004, a proposal to develop Beach Marine, the public marina across the street from the Lighthouse Grill, into a 550 unit condominium resort and private yacht club was soundly defeated by city council. As a result spawned the group Beaches Watch, a collection of Jacksonville Beach citizens that began the citizen's initiative, a referendum requiring a city wide height limit of 35 feet on all new construction. The city council proposed a similar amendment, but would allow high rise construction on the oceanfront only. In November, the citizens initiative won by an overwhelming majority of over 70%.

High rise construction and development in general has by no means slowed in Jacksonville Beach since the vote. Seven to ten story condominiums are presently being erected from 3rd to 1st Streets as investors continue to win their vested property rights in the courts.

While Jacksonville Beach is quickly becoming a world class destination, many of the locals will have to find alternative places to meet and hang out, perhaps going north out of the city to Atlantic and Neptune Beach where the casual ambience and beaches lifestyle does not seem to be threatened.

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