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PARKING STRUCTURE IN **AIRPORT'S** FUTURE

GEOFF PENDER, glpender@sunherald.com

BILOXI --- A \$50 million terminal **expansion** of the Gulfport-**Biloxi** International **Airport** should be completed by July and an announcement on construction of a long-awaited parking garage should come very soon, **airport** Director Bruce Frallic said.

Frallic defended the schedule on the parking garage, which is expected to be built by Republic Parking, the company granted the parking concession at the **airport**. **Airport** and community leaders have pushed for years for a garage to save passengers long walks from their cars across dirt and paved parking lots while subjected to the elements.

Delays and missed timetables for garage construction have caused concern among some in the Coast tourism community, and have prompted the refrain: "A world-class **airport** connected to a pasture."

But Frallic said other projects, which took considerable time and money from both the **airport** and Republic, had to be completed before work could begin on a parking garage.

"We were told we had to reduce the amount of stormwater runoff we put in the Turkey Creek basin, so we had to finish a \$3 million underground stormwater-control system," Frallic said.

"You can't build a garage before you do that. We also had to replace \$1.8 million of lighting taken out by (Katrina). Republic had to do a \$2.6 million **expansion** of surface parking spaces because when they start on the garage, that will take out hundreds of parking spaces while the work is being done."

Republic has not officially committed to build the garage or announced a timetable, Frallic said, but it must "pull the trigger on the garage" by early October, because Republic's parking contract with the **airport** expires at the end of 2007. If the company signs on to build the garage, its contract will be extended for more than 30 years.

Republic executive Chris Howley said he expected his company will build the garage, and he suspected there will be an announcement to that effect by the end of September. He said, "The way the contract is worded, there's no incentive for us to announce it early, because the clock starts ticking."

Howley said construction, from the time ground is broken on a garage, would take about nine months.

Frallic outlined the current status of the **airport** and its short-range and long-term goals to airline executives and leaders of the Coast business community Wednesday at the annual Coast Air Service Summit.

"The **airport** has about \$163 million worth of work going on in some capacity right now," Frallic said.

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Airport growth

When all is said and done, the Gulfport-**Biloxi** International **Airport** will have gone through more than \$200 million in **expansions**, renovations and improvements. Katrina, **airport** officials

say, only caused a blip and they expect big growth in coming years. Some statistics, and status of projects presented at an **airport** summit this week:

-- More seats are coming. The current 43,800 seats per month available on flights is expected to climb to 58,000 by October, topping the pre-Katrina record of 53,000 seats. The **airport** is averaging more than 35,000 passengers a month, only slightly below pre-Katrina levels.

-- A \$50 million **expansion** of the **airport** terminal should be finished by July, increasing square footage from 90,000 square feet to 165,000 square feet. The number of gates is increasing from five to seven, with the ability to easily add three more gates when needed.

-- A deal has been inked for a private company to create a new food court at the **airport**. Georgia-based MSE Branded Food Systems, which has developed similar courts for other **airports**, expects to have the eateries open by Sept. 15. They will include Arby's, Bayside Grill, Caribou Coffee, Grab & Go and Lazy Magnolia Brewing Company. There will be multiple restaurants and kiosks for several of the eateries, both inside and outside the secured area of the **airport**.