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Saturday, May. 23, 2009

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COURTING CRUISES

By MARY PEREZ - meperez@sunherald.com

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BILOxi — New Orleans and Mobile are profiting from cruise ships, and experts think a cruise line will one day set sail from Gulfport on a regular schedule.

There is much work to be done before that day, they said during a seminar at the recent Southern Gaming Summit — most notably construction of a new port and more hotel rooms, restaurants and family attractions on the Coast.

“We’ve got to get a place to park it first,” said Jim Simpson, a commissioner with the Port of Gulfport. “We’ve got the money. We’re moving as fast as we can.”



The focus of the new port is on shipbuilding, but consultants creating the business plan are also dealing with cruise ships.

Simpson said it will take five to seven years to complete the first phase of the new port. When the Coast builds a destination market and lands a cruise ship line, “There’ll be a place for them when they want to come.”

Paul Girvan is managing director of The Innovation Group in New Orleans, which does feasibility studies for casinos, government agencies, theme park developers and other companies. He said the keys to landing a cruise ship will be good airline connections

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Sun Herald The Carnival Conquest cruise ship temporarily docked at the Port of Gulfport. The first cruise ship came to Gulfport on New Year's Eve 1999 to avoid Y2K problems with other vessels on the Mississippi River.

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with low-cost, direct flights, top-quality hotels at low cost, more entertainment and attractions, rapid access to the port, an efficient cruise terminal and low port fees.

He said about 40 percent of cruise-ship passengers will stay at the port city the night before or after the cruise. The casinos already have 95 percent occupancy on the weekends and with those rooms filled with casino patrons, he thinks Gulfport would need to shift the ship schedules to midweek so they won't displace the gamblers.

Getting passengers off a weekend start for a cruise is difficult, said Robert Sturges, president of Nevada Gold and Casinos. "They want to begin and end on a weekend typically."

At New Orleans, Carnival's four- or five-day cruises start on Thursday, Saturday or Monday and Gary LaGrange, president of the Port of New Orleans, said 78 percent of the passengers drive in from as far away as Illinois and Minnesota. From the East and West coasts they tend to fly in, he said, and the

longer cruises are bringing people from Europe.

LaGrange said New Orleans markets its cruises as two vacations in one — a cruise and a trip to New Orleans. Before Gulfport could do that, he said the city needs to broaden its scope beyond casinos.

Sturges said cruise lines don't want their passengers to spend their money at the Coast casinos before they get on the ship, and passengers are actually looking for amenities at the port that are different from what is offered on the cruise ships.

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