

Coast will show governors a good time

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Biloxi — Most people on the Coast won't notice the nation's governors are in town this weekend but may rub elbows with the governors' families out in the community.

"A lot of these people have never been here before," said Joe Cloyd. While the governors are in meetings at the Mississippi Coast Coliseum, activities are planned for the spouses and fun for the kids.

Cloyd heads Gov. Haley Barbour's organizational team on the Coast and has worked on hosting the National Governors Association convention since 2005. The governors were scheduled to be in Mississippi in 2006, but Hurricane Katrina bumped those plans back to this year.

"We're going to try to show the best face of the Coast and treat people with great Southern hospitality," Cloyd said.

That begins at the Beau Rivage when the governors arrive Friday. Some will go golfing and others have arranged side trips to go fishing.

Across the street at the Biloxi Town Green, wood carver Marlin Miller will spend several days carving a 20-foot section of an oak tree destroyed by Katrina. He carved dolphins at the Institute of Marine Mammals Studies in Gulfport last week and will donate his time to carve the tree in the park into a marlin, turtle and other sea life. Representatives from the city will greet guests and play videos showing Katrina's destruction and Miller's work.

The Beau Rivage casino and restaurants will be open to the public as usual. Because of the size of the resort, "there are a few private events but it really won't affect people coming into the property," said spokeswoman Mary Cracchiolo-Spain. With the security in place she said, "It will be the safest building in the world this weekend."

The convention will bring about 1,000 visitors from around the country, including the governors, their families and staff, the media, lobbyists and others doing business with the association.

"It will put South Mississippi on the national map for a weekend in a positive light," Cloyd said.

Tucked into the gift baskets to welcome the governors will be a couple of bottles of Biloxi's famed Barq's Root Beer and goodies from across the state.

"It gives them something they can use while they're here," he said.

Special gifts commissioned by First Lady Marsha Barbour are hand-carved and hand-painted clay pitchers made by Matt Stebly, 22, of Ocean Springs, great-grandson of artist Walter Anderson.

"I didn't want to do all coastal themes," he said, and he came up with four designs with an alligator, fish and pine trees to represent the entire state.

"We ended up doing all four," he said, and he made a total of 40.

"It was a real honor for me," said Stebly. "They were going to go everywhere around the country."

The business sessions of the conference are at the Coast Coliseum, where new carpeting was laid just last week and the expansion is nearing completion. Cloyd said traffic shouldn't be a concern and only those with credentials will be allowed on the site. The Coliseum box office will be closed from Friday through Monday.

The Mississippi Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau will man an information table at the Coliseum to distribute the visitors' guides to those who want to sightsee on the Coast and will answer questions. Executive Director Richard Forester said the staff also will handle most of the registration.

When business is done, the governors and invited guests will be treated to dinner and entertainment at the Beau Rivage and Hard Rock Casino Biloxi. They tried to get Pascagoula native Jimmy Buffett for Saturday's musical salute, said Cloyd. He had a conflict, but members

of his Coral Reefer Band will be there along with Brandi, the Williams Brothers, Eddie Cotton, Paul Overstreet and other musicians who were born or live in Mississippi.

The governor's Grammy event played in Jackson and Tunica and Cloyd said, "It's going to be on the Coast at the Hard Rock next year." Marty Stuart will host Sunday's gospel brunch.

"I think people are going to have a really good time and get to understand and enjoy the sights, the tastes and smells of the Coast," said Cloyd, "and definitely the music."