



# BEACH BOOM

BY TAMMY KEARCE

THE OLDEST TOURISM destination along Florida's gulf coast is experiencing a transformation. Panama City Beach has recently undertaken a massive restoration and beautification project unlike any the city has seen before. Over 2000 existing units on the beach have already been demolished in order to make way for newer, more progressive developments. "Many of those buildings were outdated," said Jayna Leach, director of sales and marketing for the Panama City Beach Convention and Visitor's Bureau. "So those properties are being bought, torn down and redeveloped."

The Bureau estimates that over 10,000 units are currently under construction and that by 2006 more than 28,000 units will be available, with sixty to seventy percent of that occupancy represented by condominiums.

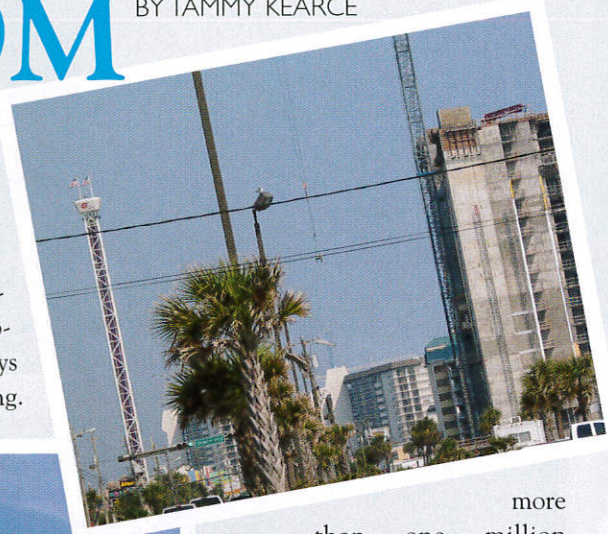
This new influx of rental property is sure to bring thousands more tourists and business people to the beach, so infrastructure has become a priority. The newly constructed, four-lane stretch of Highway 98 allows traffic to flow relatively freely between Destin and Panama City Beach; however, on the east end of the beach, where Highway 98 and Thomas Drive converge funneling commuters onto the newly constructed, \$86-million Hathaway Bridge, traffic tangles. To address this problem the Thomas Drive Flyover was designed and will connect the new bridge to Front Beach

Road, Highway 98 and Thomas Drive in an efficient configuration. Highway 79, which brings travelers south toward the beach, has also been four-laned and landscaped to enhance the area's tropical flavor. "Everyone seems supportive of the revitalization," says long-term resident Connie King.



"The only scuttle butt that I have heard is that a Chick Fil-A is being torn down to make room for one of the flyovers, and folks are a little anxious about that."

The building boom not only concerns city planners, but retailers plan to get in on the action as well. Construction is progressing rapidly on the 82-acre Pier Park, a joint venture between St. Joe and the City of PCB located across from Dan Russell Pier. This new park is intended to revitalize the pier district while providing



more than one million square feet of shops, restaurants and entertainment venues. "The face of Panama City Beach is changing drastically," says Gregory Taylor, director of resort operations for Coldwell Banker Residential Real Estate.

Whether property is rental, residential or commercial, all developments have been designed to provide adequate parking for owners and guests alike. Some of the condominiums are including parking decks or garages to take maximum advantage of a minimal space.

"Panama City Beach was already developed, but now it is really transitioning from an older product to a newer product," says Leach. But as that transition takes place, vacations at PCB may offer breathtaking scenery and a relaxed atmosphere along with a bit of construction chaos to contend with. ●