

# Atlanta Forward »

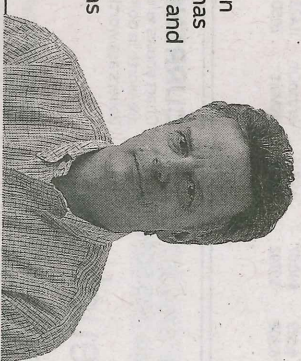
## What is Atlanta Forward?

Our region is an important part of a complex world. On these pages, we will bring you a wide array of viewpoints and insights on the issues you've told us are most important to you. We're committed to bringing you smart work by some of the best thinkers in metro Atlanta and beyond. We want to involve you in the conversation, too, so let us know what you think.

## Today's moderator: Tom Sabulis

A 20-year veteran of the AJC, Tom Sabulis has covered news, politics and the arts during a career that has taken him to newspapers across the country. Since 2008, he has coordinated many of the newspaper's pro/con debates and first-person guest columns.

» Join the discussion online today: Share your opinions and ideas at [blogs.ajc.com/atlanta-forward](http://blogs.ajc.com/atlanta-forward).



## FRIDAY CONVERSATION: QUALITY OF LIFE

Jekyll Island is a favorite getaway for Atlantans – and home to a dispute over development on the state-owned barrier island. Today, a coastal environmentalist criticizes approval of a 200-room hotel whose height, he says, will harm Jekyll's natural beauty. A spokesman for the governing Jekyll Island Authority declined an invitation to write an op-ed in response, but said the project adheres to building guidelines approved long ago.

GUEST COLUMN

# Development speeds Jekyll's urbanization

By David Kyler

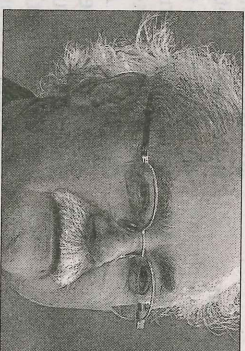
Among continuing disputes over the "revitalization" of Jekyll Island State Park is a mega-hotel that will degrade the island's treasured ambience and likely encourage further urban development.

Reaching some 67 feet in height, Jekyll's beachfront Westin hotel will be the tallest structure on Georgia's barrier islands, nearly double the height of anything allowed on Tybee Island and 50 percent taller than any beachfront building allowed on St. Simons and Sea Islands.

A 45-foot height limit was adopted by Glynn County to ensure no structures defile the tree tops of the renowned Golden Isles live oaks. However, the county has no authority over state-owned Jekyll Island.

In 2008, the Jekyll Island Authority (JIA) adopted design guidelines that included a building height limit of up to 72 feet. It was rationalized on the basis of an isolated portion of the island's highest structure – a tower atop the presidential suite at the historic Jekyll Club Hotel.

There are at least two reasons why JIA's reasoning is flawed. First, a tower imposes a far less intrusive, monolithic effect than a warehouse-width building erected to the same



David Kyler is executive director of the Center for a Sustainable Coast in St. Simons Island.

elevation. Second, the historic hotel is on the back side of the island, nestled among mature trees that soften the visual effect of its scale.

In stark contrast, the Westin will stand on an oceanfront site having no large trees nearby, close to remnant dunes and active sea-turtle nests. Due to the Westin's sheer size as well as its site, the hotel will impair the scenic quality of both the island's entryway and the beach. Late in the day, the structure will cast a massive shadow over the beachfront, making the view look more like Miami Beach than the Golden Isles – damaging the island's most valued asset: its natural, tranquil setting.

JIA has three more hotels waiting for redevelopment. If these are built to the limits of JIA's permissive guidelines, Jekyll's image will rapidly mutate from natural to urban.

Besides profoundly degrading the experience of Jekyll's beach-going tourists, the Westin will pose a significant threat to sea-turtle nesting habitat. Lighting from beachfront structures is the single greatest threat to sea-turtle hatching survival caused by shorefront development. And, according to biologists, artificial lighting problems grow exponentially with the height of shorefront buildings.

Past efforts to implement Jekyll lighting controls have not always been successful. Moreover, the Westin's size and location will make enforcement of lighting ordinances extremely difficult.

The \$200 average room rate predicted for the Westin also seems questionable in view of the affordability required in the founding legislation for the park. Cautivating an exclusive clientele is at odds with that mandate. If hotels now being planned follow this example, a trend toward less affordability will result, clashing with the public purpose of Jekyll Island State Park.

Decisions promoting such mammoth beachfront projects further conflict with the unique tranquility of the Jekyll experience. Concerned Georgians should urge JIA to reduce its building-height limitations.

# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Credible. Compelling. Complete.

ajc.com | ajc.com

FRIDAY, SEPT. 20, 2013