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Home » Cleared for Takeoff

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**DEVELOPMENT**  
**Cleared For Takeoff**

by Charlotte Crane

When Bay County's new international airport takes off in late 2009 as planned, the south Walton County town of Freeport will be 30 minutes to the west on the highway corridor that leads toward Eglin Air Force Base. Coastal resorts and tourism jobs lie some 10 minutes south over a well-trafficked bridge. "We are the crossroads to everywhere," says Freeport city planner Latilda Henninger.

Developers, taking notice, have begun to launch major projects in the 2,000-population town or its outskirts. The latest may be the most ambitious: The Plantation at Freeport by Sterling Cos. of Destin will provide retail, modest-priced homes and medical facilities.

"In essence, we have the commercial venue for growth for Freeport," says Buddy Runnels, chairman of Sterling Cos.

Sterling has sketched conceptual plans for three parcels on its 3,600 acres in the 10- to 20-year project: A 240-acre neighborhood called Ashton Park, where infrastructure work has begun; a 320-acre community with medical facilities, a bank, stores, apartments, town homes and assisted living residences; and a 160-acre business and technology park.

Freeport needs the business growth that the Plantation plan promises, says Henninger. "This will allow people to stay off the roads and earn their livelihoods right here."



Sterling Chairman Buddy Runnels



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