

Address by Mr. S. Blake McNeely before the Mobile Junior Chamber of Commerce, May 30, 1957, re

DAUPHIN ISLAND, ALABAMA

I always enjoy talking about Dauphin Island, but it is a special pleasure to discuss my favorite subject with this group of active young men, for in my opinion, Dauphin Island brings to you an "inspiration".

The first effort to build a bridge to the island was in 1867 when a bill to accomplish this was introduced in the Alabama Legislature. We gentlemen were not the promoters of that bill. However, it seems that we have been working on the project almost that long. We knew the idea was sound, and we just kept searching and striving. Looking back, it still seems very improbable.

It is the "inspiration" I would like to tell you a little more about. The heart of the "inspiration" was cooperation, and this project should demonstrate to you young men that you have cast your lot in a live and virile community where smart businessmen in all walks and professions will cooperate for the general good.

When we took an option on Dauphin Island for one million dollars, we were still in the petty cash class, but we had received some very important promises. With this option in hand, we got a promise from the Governor of Alabama to build a bridge if we could finance two million dollars in bridge revenue bonds. We got a promise from the County Board of Revenue and Road Commissioners that they would build thirty miles of hard surface streets. We got a promise from our lawyers that they would work with us to smooth out the legal snarles that always arise in so large an undertaking. We got a promise from our local bankers to help us in any way possible, and they backed this up by lending us two million dollars to expedite construction of the bridge as well as other phases of the work where only a banker could help. And then, perhaps most important of all, came a promise from a group of civic-minded real estate people that they would back the project with hard money - one hundred thousand dollars worth of hard money. This money was put up in a spirit of pure confidence and cooperation. It was agreed that their money should be spent on planning, engineering, and publicizing Dauphin Island. If the plan was successful they stood to get their money back with a chance of making a profit. If the property did not sell - well, it was a nice try.

If this seems to you today to be a sure-fire proposition, try to think back to the "primitive" days of 1953. Here was a project that had failed to meet muster many times, and not everybody was optimistic over the prospect of success, but not often had so many Mobilians committed themselves to full and complete cooperation to accomplish a single project.

The story of Dauphin Island is really three stories in one. There is a story of community effort; the story of real estate development; and then the financial story.

I have told you of the first, you know about the second, and I shall try to tell you briefly about the third.

Please remember that when I say "we" I mean the entire group of men who were working on the bridge project.

To cover the efforts of weeks and months in the short time allotted me, I must leave out many interesting, and some amusing incidents. However, we secured an option from the owners of Dauphin Island to purchase their island for one million dollars. With the one hundred thousand dollars promotion money and considerable sales effort, we sold most of the island in some three or four days for about four million dollars. Two million dollars were used to purchase Mobile County Bridge Revenue Bonds to supply to the State of Alabama our share of the three and one-half million dollars bridge cost. One million dollars of these bonds were then sold to pay for the island. And later another \$600,000 dollars of these bonds were sold to help pay for improvements. All of the money remaining after expenses of planning, engineering, and various phases of construction was placed in a Dauphin Island Trust to be spent on the betterment and improvement of Dauphin Island. The Trust also provides that any excess above expenses received from any future sales or any other income must be placed in the Trust for this same purpose.

We took the island in just about the same physical state in which the Indians left it. As a beneficiary of this Trust, Dauphin Island has developed as you see it today, and there are plans for considerably more development. Not counting the value of the several miles of waterfront property included in the sites, Dauphin Island has a Property Owners Clubhouse valued at nearly one-half million dollars. Each owner of a residential lot has dues for his entire household paid in full for ten years. There is a public Casino valued at more than four hundred thousand dollars, together with a free fishing pier and a mile of Gulf beach which has not cost the taxpayers of Mobile County one nickel. This beautiful Casino was opened for use on May 25, 1957, and it is estimated that 10,000 people enjoyed its facilities the opening weekend. It is not difficult to envision the tremendous numbers of our people who will revel in this new public playground as it becomes publicized. The island also has a very modern waterworks system, and a highly efficient sewerage disposal plant and lines representing about \$750,000. Mobile County has built thirty miles of roads and streets where only dense forests or sand beaches were before.

The Dauphin Island Bridge Committee of the Mobile Chamber of Commerce has spearheaded all of these things. In addition, the Chamber worked very closely with the Dauphin Island Park and Beach

Board and the Property Owners Association in dredging channels and small boat harbors in Dauphin Bay, Aloe Bay and other areas. The spoil from this dredging was made into beautiful waterfront lots protected with concrete seawalls - and here again the excess monies received are used for even more improvements. By this dredging also, Drury Pass was opened into Mobile Bay making Dauphin Bay a refuge harbor for small craft for the first time in the memory of living men. This was the realization of a dream of small boat operators for generations.

Other interests have also come forward with money and work to help the project. The Alabama Power Company has appropriated one and one-quarter million dollars for electric power services. The Bayou Telephone Company has invested several hundred thousands for telephone service. A fine marina with private investments in six figures serves the yachtsmen of the area. More than one hundred and forty building permits for substantial homes have been issued, and there are good prospects that another spring will see more than one large modern motel. The Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo has plans for the early construction of a permanent headquarters. The United States Air Force expects to construct a large radar warning station near Fort Gaines. Nearly sixty thousand paid visitors have passed through this historic old fort since November, 1955.

I have outlined many of these things to you with a purpose in mind. They seem big, and they are big, and they have all happened in just two years. But there is much more to be done. Hotels, motels, golf courses, airplane landings, stores and many, many other things must be done to fully realize the dreams of the ultimate Dauphin Island development. Dauphin Bay must be completely dredged out to make it the fine harbor for thousands of boats that it is destined to be. Schools and churches must be built for a growing population. There is the fire department, more permanent streets, extensions of water and sewers, improvement of picnic grounds, and a Yacht Club second to none on the Gulf, the publicizing and promotion of year around events, the building of new lands and elimination of marsh areas. One day a channel will be cut through the slim waist of the island to permit small boats to enjoy fishing in the Gulf without the long trip around the island as exists today. Amusement parks for grownups and children will be needed - and, of course, a fine Junior Chamber of Commerce.

Now, who is expected to do these things? - you guess it - you are - at least, many of you. When the Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo was first formed, it was my privilege to count everyone of those gentlemen as a personal friend. They started a fine thing, but inevitably it had to be passed on to younger hearts and hands to accomplish the big things, and you fellows are doing it today. Dauphin Island will be the same.

If I have said anything today to help you young men catch the vision and inspiration of the great potential of Dauphin Island, then I am more than repaid. I assure you that your most improbable dreams are not impossible. Thank you very much.