

## Dream starts at Beckrich

**\$9.9 million widening, Beach's first major CRA project, gets under way** *Ed Offley, News Herald*

### PANAMA CITY BEACH

With smiles of satisfaction, city officials, contractors and business leaders gathered along Beckrich Road early Wednesday to formally launch a long-planned \$9.9 million widening project.

In a brief but energetic groundbreaking ceremony, Mayor Gayle Oberst and six others pushed golden shovels into an elongated mound of dirt and tossed the material into the air. As camera shutters clicked, the roar of an earthmover a block away confirmed the project is already under way in earnest.

"For the past six years, we have been planning, designing, engineering and lawyering," Oberst told the audience. "And this year, it is finally happening."

The Beckrich Road widening is the first major construction element of an ambitious plan to rebuild the city's main thoroughfares and connector roads as part of the Front Beach Road Community Redevelopment Area. Work began in April on a \$6.7 million widening of Churchwell Road between Middle Beach Road and Front Beach Road.

"This is the first real big project in the CRA," said CRA manager Ben Faust.

Prime contractor for the project is GAC Contractors Inc., whose chief executives — CEO Charles Hilton, Executive Vice President and former Florida House Speaker Allan Bense, and Vice President Derwin White — were among the shovelers.

"I can assure you that we will do the best we can to bring this project in on time," Bense said.

The first element of the Beckrich Road widening during the next two months will be the construction of a temporary two-lane roadway on the eastern side of the existing right of way from Front Beach Road to Back Beach Road. Once the temporary lanes and new traffic signals go up, traffic will shift off the existing lanes and crews will begin demolishing the existing infrastructure along the western side of the corridor.

That phase will finish sometime in June 2008, when traffic lanes switch to the western side and the contractor crews demolish and rebuild the new lanes on the eastern edge.

In addition to four-laning the roadway, crews will place utility lines in underground vaults, build sidewalks and bike lanes and add a landscaped central median. The project also calls for creating two large stormwater retention ponds on the north and western sides of the Middle Beach Road Publix Shopping Center