

# US developer aims to revive 'rare jewel'

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By Neil Hartnell

The "rare jewel" that is Walker's Cay aims to provide year-round employment for Bahamians, after a US-based resort developer yesterday announced it had signed a contract to purchase the island off Abaco, with plans to provide opportunities for local entrepreneurs and artists.

Cay Clubs Resort & Marinas said it hoped to conclude the island's purchase by the middle of 2006, having already signed a contract with the current owners, the Abplanalp family of New York. The purchase price was not disclosed.

Douglas Wolk, Cay Clubs & Marinas in-house counsel, yesterday told *The Tribune* that the company was hoping to start negotiations for obtaining all the necessary government approvals "in the very near future".

Although the Walker's Cay Hotel & Marina were heavily damaged by Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne in 2004, and have not re-opened, Frank Rego, Cay Clubs Resort & Marinas vice-president of operations for the eastern seaboard and Caribbean, said the island had "unlimited" potential.

Michael Redd, of Michael Redd & Associates, the company responsible for masterplanning the Walker's Cay development, added: "Walker's is definitely one of the rare jewels in Bahamas chain of islands. This will be one of the truly unique Bahamian projects."

Walker's Cay has the strategic advantage of being the northern-most island in the Bahamas, thus making it the first stop-off for US boaters and yachtsmen as they move down the Abacos chain – already a well-known destination for this market.

Cay Clubs Resorts & Marinas said it aimed to restore Walker's Cay by capitalising on its world-famous reputation among boaters and sportfishermen. Television programmes in the past featured activities such as shark feeding from the island.

Anthony Giovanoli, a Bahamian who is an attorney with [a] US law firm . . ., described Walker's Cay as being among the top three recognised sportfishing destinations in the world.

The island had a "cachet" among the sport, with some 80 per cent of the world's game fishing records held by boats who had come out of Walker's Cay. The island provided access to both shallow water and deep water fishing, with boaters in deep water within minutes of leaving.

"Walker's has a long-standing reputation in the world and the community," Mr. Redd added.

Mr. Rego said Cay Clubs & Marinas had selected the 100-acre Walker's Cay as the location for its first international expansion due to its proximity to the US, "ease of doing business and ability to develop the project". The island also fitted into the company's environmental philosophy, which was built on sustainable and eco-tourism.

Mr. Rego said Cay Clubs & Marinas "reciprocal use type of membership" would ensure that Walker's Cay would receive a consistent, year-round flow of business once the development was completed and re-opened.

This, he explained, would ensure that Bahamian workers were employed full-time for 12 months of the year, rather than laid off or being placed on reduced work weeks during the summer months.

Mr. Redd described the planned employment situation under Cay Clubs & Marinas as going to "feats from the famine before".

Mr. Wolk added: "We're hoping to do away with the seasonality in that area. We'd like to make it into a full year-round resort with all the amenities that go with it." The Cay Clubs & Marinas project would emphasise employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction, Mr. Rego added, providing good benefits for its employees.

Along with a 2,800 ft airstrip, Walker's Cay includes the 71-room Walker's Cay Hotel & Marina, which has 62 guest rooms, three villas and the three-bedroom Harbour House.

There are also the Conch Pearl and Lobster Trap restaurants, two bars, the Treasure Chest gift shop, the Sea Below dive shop, freshwater and saltwater swimming pools, tennis courts, and 75 marina slips. The hotel is 50 feet above sea level.

The only facilities on Walker's Cay that are operational currently are the Customs and immigration post, plus the utilities plant that supplies nearby Grand Cay with power and water.

All the buildings are in various states of disrepair following the hurricanes, *The Tribune* was told yesterday. "For the most part, the rest of the island was pretty well destroyed," Mr. Rego said.

He added that Cay Clubs & Marinas was unable to place a dollar value on its proposed investment, as this was "still in the preliminary concept planning stage". The developer was also negotiating with the Government and local community to develop a partnership approach on what the development would eventually look like.

However, Mr. Redd said the company's "template" for Walker's Cay would include an "artisans enclave", where Bahamians could display and keep alive indigenous skills that were in danger of being lost to future generations.

He added that only two living Bahamians knew how to make an Abaco skiff, while other skills likely to be on display were fish trap making, woodcarvers, shellcrafts, water colours, the fine arts, and Bahamian culinary skills.

Dave Clark, Cay Clubs & Marinas' chief executive, had agreed to incorporate the artisans enclave into the plan at "reduced skills", giving tourists the opportunity to interact and

experience unique Bahamian culture, while teaching your Bahamians about the "lost arts" so that they would be carried on by a future generations.

Artists and artisans would also have the opportunity to sell their works to tourists.

Cay Clubs & Marinas was also interested in providing a stopover point on Walker's Cay to research vessels, while entrepreneurial opportunities will be available to Bahamians in areas such as tour guides, teaching ecology, and excursions such as sea kayaking.

Mr. Rego said the company had already begun clean-up work on Walker's Cay, and was doing various assessments, surveys and environmental studies on the property.

Describing the island as "an uncut diamond", Mr. Rego said Cay Clubs & Marinas wanted to use Bahamian contractors, suppliers and vendors "as much as possible".

He added that all buildings on Walker's Cay would be designed to withstand 150 mph winds, going beyond what was required by both Bahamian and Florida building codes, as it had done with its US properties.

"We are a company that does not jump blindly into anything," Mr. Rego said. "We will be the on-site management company [for Walker's Cay]. Once we take on a project, we're here to stay."

Mr. Wolk added: "We have a very long-term concept. We maintain and manage. We have absolute and complete long-term thinking."

Cay Clubs & Marinas owns and operates resort and marina properties throughout the Florida Keys, Clearwater, Sarasota and Las Vegas. It develops waterfront resort style living and communities.