

# THE INDEPENDENT Weekly

## News Briefs

Allen & Gooch leaving downtown Lafayette, Gulf coast cottages and more

By The Independent Staff  
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### LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Veteran Lafayette law firm Allen & Gooch, which employs 24 attorneys and a total staff of 100, is pulling up stakes from its location downtown on St. John Street to be one of the tenants at a new 63,000-square-foot commercial building at the intersection of Kaliste Saloom Road and Camellia Boulevard. And a number of other companies are also expanding or consolidating operations to move into the five-story River Ranch business center spearheaded by developer Robert Daigle.

"For us, it's strictly an issue of space, and our firm has grown quite rapidly and diversified over the last several years, so it's the value of developing downtown versus the values sustained at River Ranch," says firm partner Clay Allen. "There are parts of the business community that seem to be relocating to where the residential expansion is in Lafayette."

Allen & Gooch's move, slated for May 2007, is the third high-profile defection from downtown in recent years, following the Onebane Law Firm's move to Camellia Boulevard and The Daily Advertiser's relocation to Bertrand Drive.

"We don't want to lose anyone from the downtown, but we understand that's going to happen sometimes," says Brett Mellington, manager of downtown business development services. "There's ebb and flow in any place you go. I don't see any trends [of downtown outmigration]. Hopefully we've got some things that we're working on that will continue to improve downtown, like the two hotels in the works, and we've just completed a downtown residential survey that's generating a lot of interest."

The Allen & Gooch downtown departure is part of a ripple effect created by the new River Ranch commercial building. Van Eaton & Romero was the first tenant to sign up and will be vacating its South College Road headquarters of 17 years. Van Eaton CEO Bill Bacqué says the firm was already planning on constructing new headquarters in River Ranch but opted to rent instead after crunching the numbers. "The cost of building vs. per-square-foot cost of being a tenant was roughly about equal," he says. "Very expensive, but equal. And we weren't owners [on South College] either; we've been tenants. We decided that the Kaliste Saloom/Camellia location was superior because of its visibility."

IberiaBank took the unusual step of buying naming rights to the building, despite already having a branch under construction in River Ranch. IberiaBank Lafayette President Pete Yuan says the firm will occupy the first floor of the new building and use it to consolidate its local mortgage banking operations. "Given our strong presence in that corridor, we felt like having the naming rights in that general vicinity was important," says Yuan. He points out that the move isn't just about River Ranch for IberiaBank but part of the company's overall business plan. "We just opened up a new branch in Broussard, too, so we're always looking for opportunities throughout the greater Lafayette region."

The fourth tenant, accounting firm Darnall, Sikes, Gardes & Frederick, is leasing all of the building's remaining space, according to Daigle. — Scott Jordan

### COTTAGE INDUSTRY?

Given the option, no one would want to live in a FEMA trailer — which is why the Louisiana Recovery Authority architecture team has created an alternative that has residents and rebuilding advocates buzzing. Lafayette architect Steve Oubre and Miami urban designer Andres Duany were recently sketching cottages to replace devastated housing in Vermilion and Iberia Parish, when New Orleans native Mark Spangenberg showed up with a new product. His structural insulated panel is made of 6 inches of thick foam laminated on both faces with a concrete-like version of sheetrock. Lightweight and waterproof, it was perfect for Duany's vision. "He wanted to design a house that can drown," Oubre says, "and after the storm subsides, you can wash it out with a hose."

Duany laid out the floor plan while Oubre came up with the exterior elevations. "It was my job to make it very Louisiana," Oubre says. The result is a 770-square-foot prefab permanent cottage, which can be built for \$70,000, the same price the federal government is paying for 23-foot long temporary FEMA travel trailers. Dubbed the "Katrina Cottage," the first prototype was exhibited March 23 in St. Bernard Parish. There are 10 versions of the cottage, with different architectural styles; they can be enlarged to become a permanent residence. Full-size kitchens and baths, a distinct improvement over the miniature refrigerators and half-baths of the trailers, are some of the benefits. Vernacular architecture is another. "There's no reason not to have a beautiful Louisiana cottage," says Oubre. — Mary Tutwiler

### A TURN FOR THE WORSE

Last week, U.S. Attorney Donald Washington confirmed more than two years of widespread speculation about a federal investigation into a Lafayette cardiologist's medical practice by announcing a 94-count indictment of health care fraud and one count of criminal forfeiture against Dr. Mehmood M. Patel.

Patel, 60, is already facing a multitude of malpractice lawsuits claiming he performed unnecessary medical procedures — several hundred former patients have civil claims against him. He was indicted by a federal grand jury in February for allegedly executing a scheme to defraud both federal health care benefit programs and private insurers from February 2001 to January 2004 by performing medically unwarranted procedures on 94 patients.

The indictment alleges the doctor performed unnecessary angioplasty and placed stents in arteries of patients who didn't need them; it also claims he knew some of the procedures would cause blockages in the affected coronary arteries that resulted in subsequent medical intervention for which he also received reimbursement.

According to The Advocate, the investigation began through both an informant and an alert from inspectors with the U.S. Health and Human Services, which monitors abnormal billing and works to identify suspect procedure patterns.

Patel, who practiced at both Lafayette General Medical Center and Our Lady of Lourdes during the time period cited in the indictments, operates Acadiana Cardiology at 401 St. Julien Ave. near Lourdes. Patel no longer has privileges at either hospital, but his office says he is still practicing (he's restricted from performing any heart surgeries) and referred questions to his attorney, Mike Small of Alexandria.

Small could not be reached for comment by press time Monday.

The criminal forfeiture indictment is seeking to seize the \$2.5 million Patel received as a result of the unnecessary procedures alleged in the indictment. A conviction could put Patel in federal prison for up to 20 years. — Leslie Turk

#### **MORBID AUCTIONS**

Type "Hurricane Katrina" into the eBay search engine, and you'll be presented with 556 items for sale. There's a dollar bill that survived the storm, complete with "water marks," going for a "Buy It Now" price of \$2,900. There's also bottled floodwater going for a buck, a ceramic insulator found in a pile of debris that can be shipped for only \$6 and even special keepsake Christmas ornaments for \$3 a piece. Not to be outdone, Hurricane Rita lists 40 items, including a hammer that made it through the chaos — there was one bidder chasing it for \$13.25, including shipping and handling. — Jeremy Alford

#### **TAG 'EM**

It may cost you a few bucks to get into certain areas of Plaquemines Parish these days, especially the locales devastated by Katrina. The sheriff's office there has been charging a \$10 processing fee to visitors and others for an identification badge. Two weeks ago, the state attorney general's office ruled there isn't a law that prohibits or endorses such a tactic and the sheriff's actions "do not yet appear to rise to the level of malfeasance in office." Col. Charles Guey of the Plaquemines Parish Sheriff's Office says the decision was made to keep an eye on looters and other troublemakers using the wasteland for cover. "This just gives us access control," he says. — JA