Abbeville center celebrates first year

Array of community, state leaders attend anniversary gala.

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ABBEVILLE — Where there was a historic building before, there’s now a historical awakening.

The Abbeville Cultural and Historical Alliance Center celebrated its first anniversary after a year in which the long-sought project has become a community museum, art gallery, genealogical center, gathering place, tourist stop and source of pride in Cajun and Creole culture.

A who’s who of community leaders and state tourism officials joined in saluting center organizers, including former Clerk of Court Russell Gaspard, former Eunice Mayor Curtis Joubert, coordinator of the statewide FrancoFête observance this year to commemorate 300 years of French influence in Louisiana, praised the center’s progress and commitment to preserving and promoting the French language and culture.

He said nearly 30 million tourists will visit the state this year, swelled by French-speaking people from around the world headed to Louisiana for FrancoFête activities, which climaxed in August with the second Acadian World Congress and numerous family reunions. The first congress was in 1994 in New Brunswick, Canada.

State First Lady Alice Foster and Lt. Gov. Kathleen Blanco, who helped open the alliance center a year ago, have noted the importance of the center’s goal of involving an entire parish in cultural preservation efforts and active participation in ongoing exhibits, programs and planning.

More than 3,000 visitors from 45 states and 15 foreign countries have visited the center in its first year of operation, Mayard said at the recent anniversary event.

Vermilion Parish’s active artistic community finally have a central space in the historic downtown district to display a variety of works, he said. The center’s building on South State Street is being provided by the W.P. Edwards family estate while a permanent home is sought.

The center also provides a starting point for tours of Abbeville’s distinctive downtown area, where more than 100 businesses and homes are listed on the National Historic Register. Lelia Minvielle said her volunteer Tour Guides, with their signature red berets and sashes, know every nook and cranny.

The city’s Main Street Program, directed by Charlene Beckett, has led the way in downtown restoration and development, along with chamber of commerce officials, by using state grant funding for seed money and local incentives to spruce up building facades and make other improvements, according to Mayor Brady Broussard.

A special anniversary art exhibit through April 3 will include sculpture by James Bourge, Bill Batic and Joe Boatner Hebert; photography by Bea Frederick and James Williams, who also colorizes his work; children’s books by Sheila Hebert Collins; carvings by Robert Whatley and paintings by John Bergeron, Mary Joyce Trahan, Sylvia Putnam, Geneva Ledet, Tony Mayard, Theresa de Perrodin Trahan, Carla Stewart, Jeannie Comeaux, Charlotte Broussard and child students of Comeaux and Broussard.