**Welcome center brightens entry**

Basin facility wows crowd at opening

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**BUTTE LA ROSE —** In a ceremony that felt like an old-fashioned church revival, the state Friday unveiled a new-fangled welcome center featuring interactive exhibits and a surround-sound video about the Atchafalaya Basin.

The center will serve the millions of tourists who travel through the state and was hailed for creating jobs and raising public awareness about the endangered Basin, an ecological treasure unmatched by any other place in the world.

The tent erected for the ceremony seated 200, not nearly enough to handle the some 1,000 people who made the trip down Interstate 10 to the Atchafalaya Welcome Center. A wrap-around porch greets visitors, who come upon a sign inside reading, “You are Smack Dab in the Middle of North America's Biggest River Swamp.”

The project, Gov. Kathleen Blanco said, links her old job with her new one. As the former lieutenant governor, Blanco oversaw state tourism efforts and was closely involved in the development and refurbishment of the visitor centers. The state now has 12.

Calling the center “classy and impressive,” Blanco said it speaks well for Louisiana.

“The Atchafalaya Basin culture is unique in the United States and the world,” she said. It will help the public understand “the treasures that are ours and nobody else's.”

A film that begins with a dramatic storm in the Basin bleeds onto the

*See WELCOME on Page 3C*

**Gov. Kathleen Blanco praises Sandra Thompson, foreground, DNR Atchafalaya Basin program executive director, during opening ceremonies Friday at the new Atchafalaya Welcome Center in Butte La Rose.**

**Facts about the Atchafalaya Basin:**

- Covers nearly 1 million acres.
- Five times more productive than any other river basin in North America.
- Named in the Choctaw tongue, “hacha,” for river and “fa/aia,” for long:
- First began to form around A.D. 900.
- About 65 species of reptiles and amphibians reside in the Basin.
- More than 250 known species of birds.
- Home to the Florida panther, black bear, bobcat, nutria, mink, fox, muskrat, beaver, otter, raccoon and other animals.
- Largest nesting concentration of bald eagles in the south central United States.
Welcome

walls of a round theater that seats several dozen people. It describes “the miraculous living canvas” that is the Basin, while educating viewers about the sanctuary it provides to endangered species. A talking bird introduces the film, reassuring viewers that it won’t be long because “I’ve got an alligator for an editor.”

Sandra Thompson, executive director of the Atchafalaya Basin Program, couldn’t stop gushing.

“They were still putting the grass down last night,” she said, as she was greeted by dozens of well-wishers. She stood in front of a moving display backed by billboard-sized photographs that flipped to a new picture every few seconds. A raccoon blinked sleepily beyond her shoulder.

Also on display are still photographs of the Basin and its people, taken over several decades by author, photographer and crawfisherman Greg Guirard, a passionate advocate for saving the swamp and the resources it offers the people who live there.

While he hopes the center raises awareness about a dying culture, he also hopes people will work harder to find a way to protect it.

“It’s well-designed; very impressive,” he said of the center. “But there’s a lot more to be done.”

Water quality issues have become critical, he said.

There was a time when people could make a living off the resources the Basin has to offer, trapping the alligators and crawfish and hunting the remarkable number of creatures living there.

The subsistence fishermen and hunters no longer have a livelihood they can pass along to their children, he said.

Thompson hopes the center will raise the awareness of such issues, so the Basin lifestyle can be preserved.