BR lands bowling tourney

By KEVIN BLANCHARD
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Baton Rouge won the bidding to host the American Bowling Congress in 2005, a five-month event officials hope will pump about $60 million into the economy, city officials announced Sunday.

The next step will be a $30 million building project to add a large exhibition hall to the Centrplex, Mayor Tom Ed McHugh said.

Baton Rouge voters in November approved adding an extra penny to the hotel/motel tax to fund the $30 million expansion.

A team of nine city officials traveled to Syracuse, N.Y., this weekend to pitch their proposal to the American Bowling Congress, McHugh said.

“We made a good presentation,” McHugh said.
Baton Rouge’s competition for the tournament was Salt Lake City, which has been plagued with scandal stemming from its winning bid for the 2002 Olympics.

Baton Rouge officials presented the American Bowling Congress with an offer of $400,000. That money came from $300,000 approved last week by the Metro Council and an additional $100,000 from the Baton Rouge Area Convention and Visitor’s Bureau. The tournament will bring in about 7,000 bowlers a week for about five months, McHugh said.

The large influx of visitors is expected to bring about $60 million to local restaurants, hotels and businesses, McHugh said.

The exhibition hall must contain at least 60,000 square feet of open space, which was the one condition of the ABC, McHugh said.

The city is expected to give a solid commitment to the ABC on that condition before July 1, he said.

McHugh said he called a local architect, who assured him the square footage would be no problem, especially since the hall has not been designed yet. After the exhibition hall is finished, the ABC will construct 48 lanes in the open space to use for the tournament, McHugh said.

The arena setting will also include modern equipment and computer scoring. The Master’s Tournament portion, which features the top bowling professionals, will be televised nationally.

Last year, the city had to pull out of the running for the 2003 ABC tournament because the Centroplex expansion may not be ready in time.

McHugh said the tournament will be a high-profile event which, if it is run well, will give Baton Rouge a chance to impress the rest of the country.

“We’ll send out 50,000 to 60,000 ambassadors for Baton Rouge all across the country,” McHugh said.

Baton Rouge hosted the 1993 Women’s International Bowling Congress, then also out-bidding Salt Lake City.