MAKING HISTORY HAPPEN

THE BAYOU VERMILION DISTRICT PLANS ITS OWN HISTORICAL ATTRACTION, AS ACADIAN VILLAGE DECIDES TO STAY PUT.

"It is really exciting," says Jamieson Van Eaton, chairman of the Bayou Vermilion District. "The closer we get to it, the more excited we get. But at the same time, we don't have blinders on. We are going to study."

FOR THE LAST FEW WEEKS, THEY'VE been studying a lot of old houses. Vermilionville's atmosphere and attraction are predicated on historical representations of Acadian and Creole culture, featuring demonstrations, craft, food and music. A school, a farm settlement and chapel are only some of the features.

The architectural plans were based on the construction of replicas, but the BVD really wanted originals on site. About a dozen houses were offered for sale or donation, but the most well-known was the Mintmire Plantation and some accompanying structures. District commissioners and others involved in the project toured the Mintmire Plantation in New Iberia last week.

While they admired the Greek Revival plantation home, they coveted the Armand Broussard house, circa 1790, and the West Indies house, constructed in 1803 and being used as a bed-and-breakfast overnight rental. Stroking the animal hair in the boudoir walls of Armand Broussard house, they dreamed of its possibilities.

They wanted those too much so they were prepared to engage in some inventive financing and obtain a plantation home that didn't fit the historical character of Vermilionville and was too expensive to move and renovate anyway. Under an early plan that deeply split the board, acquiring the Broussard house, the West Indies house and a third house in Opelousas offered by Dr. Roy Boudvall of Wyoming, who owns Mintmire, would have meant the BVD would have had to pay off a $217,000 mortgage and then try to sell the property.

Days after the planning board vote, a developer pulled the BVD out of the tight spot. Boudvall, on learning that the developer didn't want Mintmire, cheerfully offered to donate the three historic buildings the commissioners did want. "This is above and beyond what anybody could expect," said Abigail R. Kerne, director of marketing for Tolson Management Co., which is managing Vermilionville.

At press time Monday, the BVD had scheduled a special meeting Wednesday to vote on the latter offer, but Kerne said most commissioners were already aware of the change and were pleased with it.

Substituting real historic structures for the replicas planned for craft demonstrations and so forth will add priceless authenticity and legitimacy to a project that has not met with universal hosannas. "I think from an historic standpoint we're going to end up with a more realistic, more tourist-oriented project," says Steve Oubre of Architects Southwest, coordinating architect for Vermilionville.

Lafayette Parish Council Chairman Louis Comeaux attended the meeting and sat through most of the debate about finances, upkeep, propriety, sales possibilities and moving dangers. Finally, he recounted an experience on a visit to Williamsburg, Va. "The tour guide said, 'Here is a reproduction,'" he said, "And the people behind the tour guide said, 'Here is the real thing.' And everyone stopped and looked.'"

BEAVER PARK BY ANY OTHER NAME is still a small, underused, worn-looking place that floods regularly. Vermilionville, taking about 20 to 25 acres of that space as well as the federally planned Jean Lafitte cultural center, would change not only the character of Beaver Park but the actual parking.

Proponents note that the land was available gratis for development, and the location just off U.S. 90 and across Surrey Street from the airport will make it easily accessible for tourists coming to Lafayette. On the
other hand, the surrounding area isn't planned to handle the volume of visiting traffic expected, and large parts of the site will have to be elevated by several feet to keep Vermilionville from routinely becoming part of the Vermilion River.

The dirt excavated to create waterways in the project will be used to elevate the site. Improvement of access roads would also accompany development.

But a more critical question is the economic feasibility of such a development. Tolson Management Co. is conducting a marketing and feasibility study, and the BVD is scheduled to decide May 15 whether to proceed to meet the target opening date of May 1989. The project is estimated at $5.2 million and is, as commissioners have noted earlier, publicly financed.

Kerne says she would not have returned to Lafayette from Nashville, Tenn.—where she was working on some projects including a Cajun festival at Opryland—unless she had faith in the Vermilionville project. A survey of craftspeople at the Native Crafts Fair during Festivals Acadiens last year turned up enthusiastic response to the idea of crafts demonstrations as a major part of the attraction.

The project also capitalizes on the national interest in Acadiana, and would offer a central destination to the out-of-towner who doesn't always know where to go and what to see after arriving in Acadiana.

It's also the only major economic development idea in circulation in a community pledged to diversifying its economic base.

But the critics make some good points. The board of directors of Acadian Village was invited to move that re-creation of Cajun history to Beaver Park, but declined. Bob Lowe, one of the founders of Acadian Village, says they were too unsure of the plans and the potential for success of the BVD project to take the risk with an attraction that prides itself on historical accuracy. "The last thing an Acadian would do is go put his house where it would go under water," says Lowe.

He criticizes the site, suggesting it should be just off Interstate 10 to pull in travelers. And while Vermilionville might be more attractive to children, Acadian Village isn't worried about competition. "The Acadian Village as it sits is among the top 100 attractions in the country," Lowe says. "Lafayette may not be able to support five or six Acadian Villages. Of course, we have a 10-year head start."

Another critic who is increasingly vocal is Randolph Trappey III. Trappey says he has done some consulting work for a private client who at one time considered a tourist attraction in the Lafayette area, and he also provided some background information to one of the losing bidders on the Vermilionville management contract. Trappey does not think the project will work, and he is very concerned by the cost to the taxpayers of paying back a bond issue for the project as well as the lack of private investment, which he says was supposed to be part of the project.

"There are terrible problems with that thing," Trappey says. He sees the airport, for example, not as a travel asset but as a source of noise of a kind that definitely doesn't fit in historically. Raising the elevation of the park will wipe out numerous trees, and a restaurant only creates more competition in a city with a high rate of restaurant failures, he says.

But in spite of the criticism, Vermilionville seems to be on track. And Van Eaton says the commissioners are not unaware of criticism and not unwilling to incorporate changes.

"We also realize that there's going to be some resistance to any change," he says.

—JANE NICHOLAS