BVD receives public vote of confidence, funding

Now that voters have approved a 10-year, .75-mill property tax for funding the Bayou Vermilion District, the BVD's leadership is tackling the challenge of enhancing public awareness about restoring, maintaining and improving the Vermilion River and its watershed.

Erin Segura, director of marketing for BVO, said she believes that BVD's imprint on the community has become more visible in the last five years. But that beyond the more tangible solutions to the Vermilion's improvement lie an array of actions that BVD employs to better the watershed for the community.

Education is a large part of the plan. "Probably the biggest impediment," continued Segura, "is that people don't understand it's a lot more than throwing your trash straight into the river. I think people have trouble making that connection that when you're driving down Johnston Street and you flick your cigarette out the window — that's eventually going to end up in the Vermilion.

"You know, if you're at a football game and the trash is spilling out of the garbage can — that's eventually going to make its way into the Vermilion," she continued. "That's the biggest thing we try to drill home is that once there's a heavy rain, any trash that's on the ground is going to make its way into the coulees and then eventually make its way into the Vermilion."

Approximately 3,700 ballots were cast, which is roughly 2.5 percent of the voting population. The millage passed with 56.8 percent approval: 2,184 to 1,538. A second proposition of a $4 million, 20-year bond to fund BVD projects, also passed with 52.91 percent of the votes: 1,966 to 1,750.

"Ever since the millage renewal has come into question, we've definitely seen who our supporters are," Segura said, from the 20-seat, cypress conference table in historic Vermilionville, a non-profit museum owned by BVD that doubles as its headquarters. "I think in general we've always had a lot of support."

"The biggest divide, maybe, is that people are very familiar with Vermilionville, but not very familiar with the bayou operations crew," added Segura, a Lafayette native and UL Lafayette alumnae. "But I feel like that's coming to light a bit more. We have lots of 'friends' of BVD who are helping get the word out."

The "word" is that BVD and its brass, according to Emile Ancelet, director of water quality, have a "common mission to improve (the Vermilion watershed's) water quality so that it makes it good for recreation and public use." When BVD was founded, the water quality was not fit for use, according to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. It has been cleared now for secondary use (boating and fishing), but the goal now that the funding is secured, is to improve the water quality for primary use, which is swimming.

Trash pickup has been a constant duty for the BVD since its inception. The morning dew and fog were still rolling over the retention pond, past the house and up the levee toward the Vermilion as crew members prepped for the day and clutched coffee cups like someone lost at sea would clutch for a life preserver.

Instead of seeming ostracized from the more presentable, facade-like business offices at Vermilionville, the BVD operations sheds, supplies and spaces are the lifeblood of Bayou Vermilion District.

Ancelet said he began working with BVD continued on page 16
as a crew member who went out daily to collect trash before leaving and returning when the division of water quality was established. He recalled his days on the water as rewarding but frustrating.

“I kind of lost my mind,” Ancelet said. “because it never ends.”

Bayou operations foreman and crew chief Tom Melancon, of Leonville, has been with BVD for 10 years. His office lies in one of the moss-covered, Acadian-style homes across a retention pond from the main offices. The crews’ workspace is literally, figuratively and metaphorically “across the pond” from the day-to-day business conducted in the main office.

“It’s neverending,” Melancon said, echoing Ancelet’s sentiment. He and crew member Chris Holland, 30, said that although the Lafayette Consolidated Government has been helpful with funding things like boons and a new bandalong, which collects debris at the entrances to the Vermilion at its tributaries, that their work is never ceasing and the levels spike after any heavy rain in the area.

“It’s not just Lafayette Parish,” iterated Ancelet. “It’s the whole community — we receive runoff and debris from St. Martin and St. Landry parishes as well.”

Melancon said the five two-member crews extract enough trash to fill approximately 150 to 200 of the 55-gallon barrels per month.

“I would like for everybody in Lafayette Parish to know that when a piece of trash flies out your truck or your yard,” said Melancon, “Eventually, that trash is going to go into a storm drain and make its way to the river, and we’d just like a little help. Pick it up.”