UL-Lafayette architecture students hope for big impact with tiny home

At 200 square feet, house will be donated at course's end

BY LEAN CAVALIER
Social to The Advocate

Senior architecture and design students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette are collaborating to build a tiny house that will have a big impact on the community, hopefully for years to come.

Theorem students are constructing a tiny house—just 200 square feet of living space—behind Fletcher Hall for a design-build elective course. When finished, the house will be donated to Habitat for Humanity and given to a person who lost their RV or trailer home in the August floods.

"The people we are trying to help are people that have already lived in a small house and want a small footprint or maybe the mobility of tiny house," said architecture professor Geoff Gruen, who is leading the project.

Gruen said a tiny-house project was originally slated to begin in the fall, but those plans fell through. Because he is on the board of directors for Habitat for Humanity, he was able to pitch the idea for the spring and have it adopted.

Students from different disciplines, including architecture, industrial design and interior design, have come together to create the home.

"It's a really good feeling just to know we're putting all this time and energy into it and it's actually going to be built," said硕梢催, .DECH .NEC, 一. 1 人, . 合. 和. "I really like that it's small and we're actually building something," Moliere said. "A lot of our classes are hands-on, but only to model size, so it's really interesting to see all the real-world experience with this project."

Gruen said schematics for the tiny house have been compiled from architecture students' past projects, such as the Beauchamp solar house built in 2009. He said the students are using structurally insulated panels on the walls of the 200-square-foot house. They also plan to install solar panels on the roof to keep the future resident's utility bill tiny, as well.

"It's pretty neat that they're so into it and so dedicated to it," Gruen said of his students' enthusiasm for the project.

Although this project involves the construction aspect, some architecture students also are helping to design tiny houses for a new Armandville-based company, Bee Tiny Houses.

Cherie Hebert, a founder of the tiny-house company and CEO and partner at BHR, Creative in Lafayette, said she reached out to UL-Lafayette when she had one-dimensional plans on paper but wanted them redrawn digitally for marketing purposes.

"I knew that UL students are trained in 3-D rendering, and they know how to use the latest technology," Hebert said.

Gruen put her in touch with a few interested students, including Farrera. Hebert also decided she'd like to name the models after the student who designs them, starting with "The Medical Center." Hebert said.

"This type of architecture actually changes a physical mark in the world," Farrera said. "You actually built something that now exists because you helped create it."

Hebert said she has offered to share her construction space with UL-Lafayette and Habitat for Humanity so everyone involved can work together to make as many homes as possible.

"I really like the idea of students being out there and my team and their team having the opportunity to learn from one another," Hebert said. "I really do want to support the public-private, nonprofit community and kind of thing as part of the business."

TINY HOME

Continued from page 1B

Farrera said construction will not be completed by the end of the semester, but the class will be offered in the summer for other students to contribute.

Molieri said she also appreciates the chance to put what she's learned in class into practice.

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> See TINY HOME, page 2B

ABOVE: University of Louisiana at Lafayette architecture students, from left, Kevin Loy, Seth Roy and Justin Segur, assemble pieces of a tiny house Wednesday as part of a class at Fletcher Hall. When completed, the approximately 200-square-foot living space will be donated to Habitat for Humanity.

LEFT: Architecture students, from left, Jacob Edmon, Lauren Lambert and Devon Hebert join woodwork textures.

ADVOCATE STAFF PHOTOS BY BRAD BOWIE

Monique Molieri, left, and Page Comeaux talk about the construction of a tiny home being built by University of Louisiana at Lafayette students at Fletcher Hall on Wednesday.

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La. hops line for sediment diversion permit

BY BOB MARSHALL
The Lens

When the news broke that Louisiana would have to wait at least 2½ years to get federal permits for a critical sediment diversion, many people in the coastal restoration community were shocked. But not for the reason you might think.

Many people in government thought it would take twice that long, even after the federal government said it would fast-track the application. That's because Louisiana must prove the proposed Mid-Barataria diversion, which will pour water and sediment from the Mississippi River into adjacent wetlands about 35 miles south of New Orleans, will not violate environmental and cultural protections enshrined in 82 federal laws and executive orders.

The list covers everything from fish and wildlife to Native American burial grounds and sacred sites.

"People always wonder why the permitting process takes so long, until they see the list of laws we have to clear," said Brad Barth, operations assistant administrator for the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority.

The fast track doesn't cut out any steps in the permitting process. Barth likened it to "a pass at Disney World. It moves us to the front of the line ahead of hundreds of others. That's where we want to be." The federal permitting process is widely disparaged, seen by many as a frustrating and needlessly slow process. But these requirements were not dreamed up by faceless bureaucrats. They were created by federal lawmakers to respond to requests by the voters.

"All the laws being consulted make up the bedrock protections that have provided this country with the cleanest and healthiest environment in the industrialized world — even as the economy has continued to prosper and grow," said Steve Cochran, director of the Restore the Mississippi River Delta Coalition, a major supporter of the diversion.

"They actually help prevent us from making mistakes we’ll have to correct at much greater expense at later dates," he said.

The heart of the permitting process is the environmental impact statement required by the National Environmental Policy Act for any action "significantly affecting the quality of the human environment." This document must be compiled by an independent contractor. In this case, Gulf Engineers and Consultants, of Baton Rouge, is handling the project.

That firm will work closely with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the permitting agency. It has regulatory authority over wetlands and the Mississippi River, both of which will be affected.

The time required to approve a permit typically grows with the size of the project. As more landscape and habitats are affected, more laws must be considered and more agencies consulted.

And the Mid-Barataria project is huge, potentially influencing thousands of square miles of wetlands and numerous communities between New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. It will pour fresh, cold river water and sediment into a brackish, warm-water estuary that is home to a long list of fish, birds and mammals, as well as human residents.

"The federal and state agencies charged with enforcing all those laws and executive orders must be satisfied the diversion will not harm the environment, animals or residents," said one federal official.

For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will examine how the diversion will affect ducks, geese and doves covered under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act; plovers, manatees, turtles and sturgeons covered under the Endangered Species Act; bald eagles under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act; and wetlands under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

Other laws protect humans from the impacts of new projects. The Environmental Protection Agency will be involved under the Clean Water Act and the Toxic Substances Control Act, to name a few.

Meanwhile, the Corps must assess impacts to levees, floodwalls and navigation under the Rivers and Harbors Act. Will diverting water into the wetlands weaken levees protecting communities? Will drawing water from the river prevent ships from using it?

All these questions must be addressed in the environmental impact statement.

How the diversion will affect the ecosystem and nearby communities will depend largely on how much water is allowed to flow through its gates, for how long and at what time of year. The state will provide options on how it could operate the diversion so that federal agencies can assess how people, animals and the environment would be affected.

Once the environmental impact statement is complete, it will be open to public comment for at least 45 days. The Corps must then answer each question raised by the public before making a final decision on the diversion.

Because the permitting process must weigh any possible environmental harm against the overall benefit of the project, no one expects the Corps to reject the permit. Instead, the state will work to satisfy all concerns raised by federal regulators.

They could be numerous. This would be the first controlled sediment diversion ever built in the U.S., if not the world, so there is no history of impacts for the agencies to refer to.

That's one reason this will take so long — time the state can ill afford. Every year, Louisiana loses about 16 square miles of its coastal landscape to open water. Scientists expect that to accelerate along with human-caused rise in the sea level.

Even so, environmental advocates caution against eliminating any steps in the review process.

"We should do everything we can to speed the process," Cochran said, "but we shouldn't do away with any steps, as some would suggest. Every step in this process is important. It keeps our environment and the people who live here safe."

In 2011, state and federal scientists and officials inspect a recently formed marsh island, part of a freshwater diversion project to counteract coastal erosion, during a tour for coastal restoration representatives hosted by Plaquemines Parish. Louisiana received news that it will be able to move quicker than expected through the diversion permitting process.