Survey reveals area businesses missing boat

By Timothy Beacham

A recent survey of African American visitors to Acadiana shows that area businesses are missing the boat on billions of dollars in tourism revenue.

Scott Ray and Associates of New Orleans, who conducted the survey for the Multi-Cultural Department of the Lafayette Area Convention and Visitors Commission, showed that African American tourists who visit South Louisiana tend to spend more money and stay longer than other visitors.

"This is great news," Shannon Cooper, coordinator for Multi-Cultural Marketing, said. "But unfortunately, the African American business owners in the area don't take advantage of the resource."

Of the 371 members of the Convention and Visitors Commission, only six of them are African Americans.

The commission membership gives the business owner tips on what groups will be coming into the area and in turn gives the visiting groups a list of businesses that are targeted for that group. Commission membership is $125, which is tax deductible.

"We need to get local African American business owners to realize the scope of the enormous market available," Cooper said.

According to Cooper, 1993 was one of the biggest years for tourism in Louisiana. The second largest industry in the state grossed over $5 billion from visitors outside the state, generating more than $600 million in state, local and federal taxes.

Cooper said that the lack of response from area African American merchants to the commission has been caused by both neglect and cost.

"When we first started, we went after any business, now we have targeted African Americans and the response is better," Cooper said. "Others felt the $125 was too much for something that they felt over-promoted the Cajun aspect of Louisiana and didn't focus upon the Creoles."

Cooper said that Creole has been overlooked for too long for the contribution they have given to Louisiana history.

The strategy for the commission now is capitalize on the explosion of multi-cultural visitors to Acadiana.

Festival time in Acadiana brings in visitors of all races to the area to enjoy the unique blend of food, music and 'joie de vivre' that is Acadiana.

For example, the Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Music Festival in Plaisance has grown in the past five years from a small country festival attended by few hundred fans to one of the largest in the area (20,000 people took part in last year's festival).

Cooper began marketing the Zydeco Festival through the Multi-Cultural Department this year in hopes to promote further growth for the festival through African American dollars.

"We hope that events like this will prompt more small businesses to join the commission," Cooper said.