BLAZING A TRAIL
Proponents push BR-New Orleans levee bike path

BY GAIL OLIVER

Advocate business writer

Cyclists in Baton Rouge have embraced bicycling and walk-
ing path stops the Mississippi River levee in New Or-
leans and will soon extend to Baton Rouge.

Less well known, however, is an impending under-con-struction along the east side of the river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, a 45-mile bike-riding expedition pro-
gram that will change the way today's residents and visitors approach the river.

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the way you have happy employees is help them enjoy the community you're employing them in."

Eastin said she has encountered resistance, though it has become less in recent years. She once had a levee commissioner in Mississippi complain that a trail system would attract 100,000 Yankees. "There are still some social challenges and it takes time," she said, "but once there's a trail system established, people clamor for more."

Salins, of the Pontchartrain Levee District, said the parishes will have to work out any issues with the other interests around the levee, from cattle farmers to the Christmas-time bonfires in St. James and St. John.

Hursey said the study has the path bypassing the Hunt Correctional Center, for example, and diversions or alternate surfacing materials are potential options for the portions of the levee used for bonfires.

"I'm a cyclist, so I like it," Salins said of the idea, "but there are a lot of things to consider."

Vial said that while there was some initial apprehension from industry in St. Charles, where a lot of employees ride their bikes to work. None of the initial security concerns have borne out, and he and SJB's Hursey, who also heard some initial concerns from industry, say that increasing public use of the levee makes them safer.

"These days everyone has a cellphone and I'm sure they won't hesitate to call the authorities if they see anything," he said.

St. Gabriel Mayor Johnson was similarly unconcerned: "I don't anticipate any issues with having the industry on board."

Eastin said the communities along the river just have to push local officials to keep the project moving forward, even one section at a time.

"It's really a matter of taking a bite out of the elephant," she said, noting the economic development benefit for the state as a whole should be a unifying factor.

In addition to federal grants, Eastin said, communities can raise funds, noting the insurance and medical industries are among many with a stake in public health. She said those industries contributed heavily to the Arkansas River Trail and the Medical Mile, a downtown outdoor linear health museum.

Much of the funding so far has come from federal Transportation Enhancement Act grants, though there are others, including Scenic Byways, Tiger Grants and Community Development Block Grants, proponents say.

In 2008, U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu secured $1 million for Baton Rouge's downtown levee bike path and another $1.4 million last year for the 6.5-mile completion of the path from Farr Park to Ben Hur. She also got $423,400 for Kenner's levee bike path. Her office said last week that, despite the recent elimination of federal earmarks, the senator will continue to work with parishes on finding ways to fund the Mississippi River trail and other bike paths.

"I strongly support reducing wasteful government spending, but initiatives that improve health and quality of life are not wasteful; they are important investments in the future of our communities," she said in a written statement.

Vial pointed out taxpayers have spent billions of dollars on the levee system and there's no reason the levees shouldn't be multipurpose.

"Why not let the public enjoy these facilities that we paid for with tax dollars?" Vial asked.