Scouts Helaman Flores, back, and Nicholas Pietz, front, lead a group of Boy Scouts with Troop 1830 from Houston through the Atchafalaya Basin near Henderson last week.

Boy Scouts eye adventure camp in Atchafalaya Basin

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LAFAYETTE — The local Boy Scouts of America council is laying the groundwork for a new public recreation area and adventure base camp in the Atchafalaya Basin as part of the group’s efforts to encourage exploration of the vast swamp.

The Legislature this year signed off on leasing the Boy Scouts of America Evangeline Area Council about 450 acres of state-owned swamp land on the outskirts of the Catahoula community in St. Martin Parish and has tentatively approved $3.9 million for planning and other preliminary work.

The chance to explore the Basin’s many wonders is already attracting interest from Scouting groups across the nation and even foreign lands.

“One of our goals is to teach people how to get into the Basin,” said Evangeline Area Council Scout Executive Art Hawkins. “We want to give people a first-person experience.”

The idea has its roots in the need for a permanent facility to serve the Evangeline Area Council’s new Atchafalaya Swamp Base adventure program, which offers Scouts a week-long, 60-mile trek through the swamp.

The adventure starts with some cultural lessons in Lafayette and a taste of local food.

Scouts then head to the Basin, where they spend their days kayaking, fishing and riding airboats. Their nights are spent on houseboats, in hammocks strung between trees and on an island outpost. And all the while, they are learning about the history, people and ecology of the swamp.

The adventure program began in 2013 with 140 participants who came in a series of trips over the summer.

There are more than 200 participants this summer, and 250 have already signed up for next year, said Swamp Base Director Ben Pierce.

He said Scouts from across the U.S. come, eager for the chance to experience the Basin. He said...
he's now getting inquiries from outside the country.

"There is a world-wide interest in what we have right here in our backyard," Pierce said.

He said the Basin swamp trek not only offers the adventure of a lifetime but also gives outsiders a taste of Louisiana's culture and a new appreciation for the state's wilderness.

"Everyone understands what a mountain is. everyone understands what a beach is, but a swamp is misunderstood," Pierce said.

The planned base camp would include a dining hall, dormitories, conference space, docks, research facilities and a welcome center.

Hawkins said it would serve as a center of operations for the summer swamp treks and other Scouting trips and could be used for a wide-range of collaborations with area schools, university groups or any organization looking to better connect with the Basin.

The lease deal with the state requires that at least half the 450 acres be developed as a recreation area open to the public.

Hawkins envisions hiking trails, campgrounds and canopy tours - zip lines, platforms and pathways through the tree tops.

Don't expect a swamp resort.

"Our intent is to leave the property as natural as possible," Hawkins said.

There is no timeline for completing the project.

The Scouts have set a funding goal of $30 million. Of that, $20 million would be used for planning and construction, $2 million for supplies and equipment and $8 million to seed an endowment for ongoing upkeep and maintenance.

"This ensures that we are not going to build something and in 20 years from now it will be in disrepair," Hawkins said.

The recently approved state budget tags $3.9 million to help get the project going.

The money is in the budget as Priority 2, a classification that generally means funding is likely but not assured. There have also been discussions of matching dollars from the state for donations the Scouts secure.

Hawkins said serious fundraising efforts had just begun last year when they were put on hold to hash out agreements with the state. He expects it will be easier to approach donors now that a site has been identified and there is a pot of seed money.

"Last year, we had none of that," Hawkins said.

He said the ultimate goal is for the Scouts to develop a resource to open up the Basin to the general public, who often might want to experience the swamp but have no idea where to begin.

"There are people who live right next to the Basin and don't know how to get to the Basin," Hawkins said.

For information, visit www.bsaswampbase.org.