Caddo allows 200 acres for ex-research chimps

By The Associated Press

SHREVEPORT — The first large sanctuary for chimpanzees no longer used for medical experiments will open in Shreveport on 200 rolling acres, organizers say.

The land that Caddo Parish has given to Chimp Haven Inc. will provide living space for 200 chimps in large social groups, said Linda Koebner, the group's executive director.

Other retired chimps are at Primarily Primates, in San Antonio, Texas, which has 70 chimps. Five former astrochimps are kept at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Wash.

The Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care in Boynton Beach, Fla., is trying to raise $14 million to build and run a retirement home for 143 chimps now at the Holloman Air Force Base aeromedical lab in southern New Mexico.

"If they get one done too, that's great," Chimp Haven spokeswoman Karen Allen said.


However, Koebner said Chimp Haven will consider the parish's needs as well as its own. "I think it will be a cooperative effort," she said.

As many as 100 of the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center's chimpanzees will be the first to move to Shreveport, said Tom Insel, director of the institute in Atlanta.

Chimp Haven is raising $5 million to build its facility and $12 million more for an endowment for the care of the chimps, which can live as long as 60 years in captivity.

That would include $7.5 million in start-up money that U.S. Rep. Jim McCrery hopes to get from the federal government, but the center will open whether or not it gets that money, Koebner said.

"It would certainly speed things along if we get federal support," Koebner said. Federal money is currently supporting most of the chimpanzees, and it costs about three times as much to keep them in laboratories as it would to keep them in the sanctuary, she said.

"It seems a cost-effective way to deal with this problem," she said.

The 200 acres are about one-sixth of the Eddie D. Jones Nature Park; the Caddo Parish Commission has a meeting Wednesday to decide what to do with the rest of it.

Linda Brent, the group's president, said Chimp Haven plans a medical building, a food storage area, an administrative building, and heated winter shelters for the occasional freezing weather.

There also would be outdoor areas for large groups of 15-20 chimpanzees and for smaller groups, and rooms where the chimpanzees can get to know each other after years in cages.

Southern Florida is probably the only part of the country that wouldn't need a heated building, she said.

"In Shreveport, there's a good amount of rainfall, humidity, lush growth, and hardwood and softwood trees. It's about as close to Africa as we can get," she said.

She and Koebner both praised Caddo Parish. "I am pleased the area's civic leaders are eager to take a world leadership role in creating a facility that celebrates and protects the animals that have given most of their lives to improve the human condition," Brent said.

Koebner said about 600 of the 1,600 chimps now at research centers around the country are ready for retirement. The sanctuary could also take in chimps whose owners no longer want them as pets or those who are no longer wanted by the entertainment industry, which often uses baby chimpanzees.

"This project is a very positive thing," said Michael Williams, president of the Caddo Parish Commission. "It will be a way to provide a family-oriented activity where children can come and learn about chimpanzees. It'll also be a way to increase tourism because it will be one more thing to attract people to our area. In addition to that, it will create jobs."