The people who walk into the Cajun Dome next July will just be in awe," said Gerald Breaux, Director of Lafayette's Convention and Tourism Commission.

He is just one of the many people to comment on the feeling one gets when viewing the physical structure of the building.

The Cajun Dome looks like a cross between the New Orleans Superdome and the Houston Astrodome, except built on a smaller scale. But no matter what your vantage point, as close as the parking lot of Cajun Field, or driving by on Congress, it is hard to think anything about the structure except that "it's huge".

The white walls are formed by 100 pre-poured concrete sections stacked one on top of the other to reach a height of 80 feet. The roof of reaches upward for another 84 feet to arch at a rounded peak of 184 feet above the arena floor.

Its inner walls are lined with a total of 8,795 permanent seats. The remaining 3,297 seats are non-permanent to assure the greatest flexibility for and useage of the 40,000 sq. ft. arena floor. The Cajun Dome seats approximately one-sixth the capacity of the Superdome, which means a maximum seating capacity of 12,000.

Whatever loss the dome suffers to other domes because of size should be well countered by the "finishing touches". Some of those touches will include 29-25 luxury boxes to be-leased, a production quality sound system, elevators and escalators to mention a few.

The broad wing on the north, sloping toward Congress will house a well-equipped kitchen capable of supplying activities with food-stuffs from sandwichwiches to full course meals.

The east wing has five interconnected meeting rooms. The west side is storage area, and the south wing serves as the main entrance. The main entrance includes a 60-foot covered driveaway designed as a covered entrance and exit to the dome, no parking allowed.

The cost of the dome was originally projected at $24 million. After architect Neil Nehrbass drew up the plans, he gave the city an estimate of $36 million. He didn't miss much with his ballpark figure, because the first bids to build came in at $44 million.

By the time the first bids were submitted, it had been decided that the state would commit to 75 percent of the building costs and the city would commit to the remaining 25 percent.

Money matters

The city agreed to handle the operating costs of the dome. Thus far, the total amount spent on the project is under $63 million. $69.9 million of that cost is for the building and an addition $3.6 million will be spent to build an access road through USL's property. The road will allow motorists to drive by the south facing entrance of the dome. It will connect Johnston to Congress.

Applying the percentages to the current total spent, the state will be spending $46.8 million and the city's cost will be a remaining $16.6 million.

It would seem that two business entities involved in the deal would be a little rattled by the unforeseen cost thrust upon them. According to local press to date, the cost is of very serious interest, but predictions of the domes success are positive enough to help maintain a calm attitude.

Besides, more often than not, building contractors often underestimate the cost of major projects such as this one. Obviously, all involved took this into consideration. All indications are that the plans for the Cajundome project were well thought through at all levels of planning.

Controversy

There was some controversy about the delayed period of time taken by Mayor Dud Lastrapes to name a manager to the dome. The mayors reply to impatient criticism was that he felt the importance of the decision justified the time it took to make it.

According to local news sources, USL President Dr. Ray Auristement is quite happy with the deal. USL gets 23 free dates in the Cajundome each year during the 25 year term agreement with the city. The time length of that agreement just happens to coincide with the term of the bonds sold to finance the state's share of the tab.

The fact that the university owns the building and that it is located on university property should indicate the importance of the university's role in the city. The advantages presented by a facility of this sort are unimaginable, although there are some advantages that are immediately evident. From the sports world to the entertainment world, it seems certain that Lafayette will have a better chance to bring more of the world outside right to its doorstep.

The first opening of the Cajundome is slated for July of next year.

September 26, 1984