Mayor Screen and other dignitaries officially open Catfish Town
An original Catfish Town resident, Pauline Barcelona, gets applause from participants.

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Charles Gerald

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Opening

(Continued from 1A)

to come back next week when it's not so crowded.

The project even got a good review from a past critic.

Jim Talbot, a candidate for mayor and a member of the school board, said he thought it would be a "plus" for Baton Rouge.

"I'm totally 100 percent behind the project . . . I think it's going to be great for Baton Rouge," he said.

Talbot found one thing he didn't like about it. He was asked not to pass out campaign literature in Catfish Town.

He agreed, saying he didn't want to "mar a great day for Baton Rouge. I certainly don't want an incident. This is their day. Our day will come."

Talbot said Screen will "benefit from it from a political aspect. I think it's going to be the full brunt of his campaign . . . tied together with the National Sports Festival."

Talbot said he is still upset over the loss of School Board property taxes that were abated by the council and mayor. He said he opposed that additional "government break" as "not sound business" for the city.

When asked about the ban on politicking, Dodson said he and Screen decided that politics should take a day off in Catfish Town.

Although the central mall is a public street, the developers have rule-making authority and Dodson said he decided to envoke that right.

He said Screen's campaign had planned to do some politicking but dropped the idea.

Grand opening ceremonies were about 10 minutes late, but not because the mall wasn't ready. The slight delay in getting started was more a factor of the large crowd jammed into the center of the renovated warehouse district.

It simply took officials on the program a few extra minutes to wind their ways through the throng and reach the podium.

Dodson was smiling and looking a great deal fresher than a man who had worked until midnight the night before, risen at 4 a.m. and been hard at it again by 6 a.m.

Flores appeared a bit more nervous than usual as he worked his way to the podium.

"People of Baton Rouge, we give you Catfish Town!," Flores thundered with the exuberance of a ringmaster.

And, as one might expect in an election year, there was more than a little political backslapping during the opening ceremonies for the $27 million retail/entertainment center.

Dodson paid tribute to all the federal, state and local politicians who helped ramrod the project through various levels of bureaucracy. Mayor Screen lauded the area legislative delegation, the local congressional delegation and parish officials.

U.S. Department of Commerce Undersecretary Donna Tuttle paid tribute to her boss - President Reagan - and the administration's economic development policies.

Ms. Tuttle hailed Catfish Town as an excellent example of the kind of renovation that is taking place all over the nation.

Enterprising developers in cities "from Boston to Baton Rouge" are forming partnerships to preserve and capitalize on the rich heritage of America's inner cities, she said.

Ms. Tuttle said.

The end result of such restoration activities is the economic tumble of jobs and dollars out of the project and into the community at large, she added.

Later, Ms. Tuttle said she had invited Dodson to Washington to talk about some of the federal programs available to promote tourism through projects like Catfish Town.

Recalling his younger days as a Baton Rouge resident, Sen. Russell Long recalled Catfish Town as a name familiar to most Baton Rouge residents, but very few really knew where it was.

"I remember visiting it once or twice, but for the most part, it was a part of town you'd bypass," Long said.

America has lost too many of its old central cities, Long said. As populations expand and move away from the downtown area, the tendency has been to let that central city area crumble and die, he said.

But, many cities are seeing a rejuvenation of the old downtown areas, thanks in part to the infusion of federal dollars, he said. In cases where federal assistance is provided, it is often the little extra that is needed to make a project go, Long said, pointing to the tax incentives and Urban Development Action Grant loan that helped make Catfish Town possible.

"The greatest part of being in politics is being able to be involved in a project like this," said U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La. "Where we can see someone's idea take root, grow and blossom into something like this... Of all the human qualities that make something like this possible, creativity and imagination are the most important."

In addition to the usual assortment of public officials and politicians, Catfish Town developers had a special guest on the podium - a real Catfish Town native. Pauline Barcelona was born in Catfish Town in 1898, but she doesn't know exactly where in the sprawling 7½ block area.

"No one ever told me," she said. "And I never thought to ask."

Flores also used the grand opening ceremony to announce the signing of another major tenant for the Catfish Town center.

Louisiana Broadcasting Corp. - parent of WQXY and WLCS radio stations - had planned to move its office and broadcast studios out of the downtown area, but Wednesday morning the firm inked a contract to move into Catfish Town, Flores said.