Calling it a "highlight of my administration," Gov. Dave Treen and others turned spadeful of dirt in a large grassy lot next to USL Cajun's Field where a $44 million Civic Center will be constructed.

During the groundbreaking ceremony, Treen said the target date for completion of the project is July 1985. "I would like to be back here in July 1985," he quipped. "I would like to come to the Civic Center site in the executive helicopter again."

Many state and local officials were on hand for the groundbreaking ceremony, including USL President Ray Authement, Sen. Allen Bares, Reps. Ron Gomez, Luke LeBlanc, Mike Thompson, Mayor Dud Lastrapes and former Sen. Sonny Mouton, who is now Treen's executive counsel.

For All Of Acadiana

Mouton commented, "This is not a Lafayette project. This is a project for all of Acadiana."

Predicting that the Assembly Center will be one of the finest facilities in the nation when it is completed, Mouton noted that USL, under Authement's leadership, is the cohesive factor of the project.

The Civic Center is a joint venture between the city, USL and the state.

Although it is a university project, Treen told a crowd of onlookers, it has a dual capacity as an Assembly Center for Lafayette and Acadiana.

Today's groundbreaking was anticlimactic since Treen was in Lafayette in December to announce the state would be able to provide additional money needed to get the project started.

At the time Treen made that announcement, he and other state and local officials visited the site. When they arrived, someone offered a shovel and most officials in attendance got a chance to participate in a spontaneous groundbreaking ceremony.

But this morning's ceremony was more formal, although officials involved seemed no less pleased that actual construction of the project will now begin.

Once Tenous Future

For a few weeks in November and December of last year, the Civic Center's future was hanging in the balance, since the low bid for the facility came in about $8.6 million higher than projections. Blount Bros. of Montgomery, Ala. was the low bidder at $44.8 million.

Treen was asked to support an expenditure of more state money and several weeks elapsed until he announced he would seek approval from a legislative budget committee to allocate about $6 million more for the Lafayette Civic Center. That approval was later granted.

The city of Lafayette will provide the additional $2 million needed to cover the bid.

The state will use funds available from its Capital Construction Interest Account to pay the state's share of the additional cost, while the city probably will use its portion of Mineral Trust Fund revenues.

Construction is expected to take about 3½ years. The facility will be operated by the City of Lafayette.

The multi-purpose Civic Center will seat 14,000, with 12,000 seats available for basketball games. Festival seating will accommodate 11,335 people.

Banquet facilities can accommodate 3,000 seated guests. A total of 40,000 square feet of exhibit space will be available. Architects estimate the Civic Center can hold 182 exhibit booths that are 10 feet by 10 feet. Meeting room space will total 47,000 square feet.

An estimated 4,000 parking spaces will be included.

When first suggested, the Civic Center was projected to cost $24 million. The original financial agreement called for the state supplying $18 million and the city kicking in the remaining $6 million. USL donated the land on which the Center is to be built.

By April 1980, projected cost of the building had grown to $40 million. The city was to pay $30 million and the city $10 million.

Part of that $40 million was used for engineering and other miscellaneous pre-construction costs, so about $36 million was left for the actual construction contract.

But bids came in much higher than expected. The low bid was $44.8 million.