Convention center OK’d

After 14 years, Cajundome to be completed

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State Editor

BATON ROUGE — For Rep. Jerry LeBlanc, Friday’s final approval of funding to build the Cajundome Convention Center was the realization of a seven-year effort. For those in the hospitality industry in Lafayette, it could be a gold mine.

The Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget, chaired by LeBlanc, D-Lafayette, unanimously endorsed the project, for which tourists visiting Lafayette essentially are picking up the check.

Seven years ago, LeBlanc got legislative approval to set aside sales and use taxes paid by customers of hotels, motels, bed-and-breakfast inns and campgrounds in Lafayette Parish to create the Lafayette Visitor Enterprise Fund. The first two years’ revenues went to improving museums but since then, the money has gone into a fund to build a convention center.

“This has been the plan since the Cajundome was originally envisioned,” an ecstatic LeBlanc said Friday. “Because of the cost, the dome was the only thing that could be built. It was impossible to get bonds (to build the convention center) from the state because the Cajundome cost so much. The facility was incomplete.”

Designers used the Mississippi Gulf Coast Coliseum as a model for the Cajundome.

When the Lafayette facility was built, the interior was modified for meeting rooms but they proved too small to handle conventions. Renting the full facility was too expensive and impractical for most conventions. Also, special events, such as craft shows, tied up the facility when it could have been used for much more profitable events, such as concerts.

Groundbreaking for the convention center is scheduled for January, LeBlanc said, and construction could begin in February for the 96,000-square-foot facility. The opening date is forecast for mid-2002.

The facility has endured several delays.

In 1996, the Legislature appropriated $9.6 million for the construction and on Jan. 31, 1997, another $2 million from the visitor’s fund was added, bringing the available funding to $11.6 million.

Because of design disputes, bids weren’t taken until June 2, 1999, and all five bids came in more than $4 million above the available amount.

Steps were taken to cut $1.2 million without affecting the plan, and the State Bond Commission approved the Cajundome Commission’s request to issue $4.5 million in bonds to complete the project. That brought the total available to $16.1 million.

When bids were taken Wednesday, all four bidders were within 5 percent of each other. The low bid for construction — $13.5 million — was offered by Rudick Co. Inc. of Lafayette. Because of additional fees, such as other construction, design, risk insurance and testing, the total project cost rises to $16.67 million.

The Cajundome Commission is pledging an additional $577,000 in self-generated revenues to supplement the available funding.

Daily Advertiser

Dec. 4, 1999

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THE DAI

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