By VICKI FERSTEL
River parishes bureau

GONZALES — The Federal Aviation Administration approved the first $1.5 million for the proposed $8 million Ascension-St. James general aviation airport, Airport Authority Chairman Nicky Prejean announced Thursday.

Meanwhile, airport opponent Theresa Robert of Burnside has filed a 60-day notice with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that she intends to sue the agency in order to force them to perform a wetlands evaluation on the airport site.

On Thursday, Prejean handed members of the Ascension Parish Police Jury copies of a March 20 letter from U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La., announcing the FAA funding for land acquisition and development for the airport.

The land, off La. 44 south of Gonzales, was purchased by the state in 1986. Prejean said the $1.5 million will be used for site preparation.

The state Department of Transportation and Development had submitted a $5 million grant application to FAA for the first phase. Neither Prejean nor Johnston’s letter explained why the grant application was not funded in full.

The controversial project got off the ground, after years of stalls, when the Police Jury agreed last year to sponsor the project.

That sponsorship means the Police Jury guarantees maintenance costs for the airport for 20 years. Airport Authority officials have suggested that the airport will pay for itself.

Prejean said some police jurors — in Washington, D.C., last week on convention — and members of the local legislative delegation — who also were in Washington — worked on getting the FAA appropriation.

“I’ve made some enemies in this endeavor,” said Prejean. “Some I’m real sorry for. Some I could care less about.”

Prejean then offered a public apology to Police Jurors Marvin Braud, Charles Parent and George Carpenter, all of whom opposed the sponsorship.

Braud said he opposed the sponsorship because maintaining the airport will cost more than the Police Jury is anticipating. “Just watch what I’m telling you,” he said.

Braud said he would have preferred the Police Jury to ask the voters to consider a property tax to support the airport.

“If the people would have supported it, I would have been for it 100 percent,” said Braud.

“I did feel the majority of the people should have been given a choice,” said Parent.

Carpenter did not attend the meeting.

Others on the Police Jury expressed their support.

“I feel that this airport is a much-needed thing,” said Joseph U. Pierre.

“I’ve heard a lot of rhetoric about what it’s going to cost to run it,” said Shafter Kling. He said that rhetoric was not supported by his own research on similar airports.

“I think it’s the best thing that happened to Ascension Parish in a long time,” said Kling.