Hundreds take part in Bayou Vermilion Festival and Boat Parade

BY NICK FONTENOT
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LAFAYETTE — More than 300 vessels — from paddle boats to 40-foot yachts — flowed down the Vermilion River on Sunday as the Bayou Vermilion District worked to raise recreational awareness for the river during the third annual Bayou Vermilion Festival and Boat Parade.

“The Vermilion River is a beautiful natural resource,” said Emile Ancialet, water quality coordinator for the Bayou Vermilion District. “It runs literally through the middle of Lafayette. This should be used by everybody.”

Ancialet said his work with the Bayou Vermilion District and its seven-member staff is never complete, especially with the staff traveling the river daily and picking up more than 60 50-gallon drums of trash from the river each week.

When the Bayou Vermilion District was created in the late ’70s, river recreation along with an effort to take care of the river were at an all-time high, Ancialet said, but Lafayette’s extensive development over the past 40 years caused the water quality — and the public effort to keep it clean — to taper off. He said events like Sunday’s boat parade help with public awareness.

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“We have been around for so long, and at the beginning there was a big public awareness and I guess it just became expected that the district was being taken care of,” Ancelet said of district employees keeping the river clean. “Lately, there has been an emergence of awareness.”

“We are still pulling out massive amounts of trash, and our crew goes out there every week and pulls out those drums,” he added. “This brings public awareness to the problem but also lets them know that we are open for recreation.”

The vessels set sail in Vermilionville and ended at the Camellia Bridge in River Ranch. Cajun music serenaded the event, and the party that awaited the participants featured food from Taco Sisters, beer from Bayou Teche Brewing and live music from the Lafayette Rhythm Devils Trio.

“We’ve had symposiums all day, but the main attraction is the boat parade,” said Erin Stickney, public relations and marketing coordinator for the Bayou Vermilion District. “All of our canoes were all rented out, and we have lots of people who brought their personal vessels. It is not a race and is definitely meant to be a leisurely paddle.”

Bayou Vermilion Operations Manager Curtis Willingham said many people are familiar with Vermilionville, but more often than not, they’re not familiar with the efforts of the district. He said because most of the Vermilion River sits on private property, many residents don’t realize there is a waterway in Lafayette and certainly aren’t aware of the district’s efforts to maintain it.

“A lot of cities that have waterways, there is a lot of public property where you can access the water,” Willingham said. “The bottom line, we are funded by tax dollars. We want people to know what we’re doing. We’re doing a great job, and if more people know it, we can continue to do it.”

Willingham said the district is always looking for opportunities, like Sunday’s boat parade, to continue raising awareness of the Vermilion River.

“We want to bring people here, show them the river and show them what we do,” Willingham said. “We tell them 99 percent of the trash in the river is something that someone threw on a city street. You’re at a festival downtown and throw a cup on the street, it eventually comes into the bayou. Any opportunity to explain to someone why they might prevent them from throwing that next cup on the road.”

Ancelet said Sunday is huge for the river’s overall recreational use and said public awareness and recreational use is on the rise. He said there is year-round interest in the boat parade and it will definitely make a return next year.

“We should have recreation on this river all the time,” Ancelet said. “It feeds Bayou Tortue; it feeds Evangeline Canal. You can get to Lake Martin from the Vermilion. You can get to Palmetto Island State Park. It should be more than what it is. Getting people out on the river and getting them excited and showing them that recreation is possible on the river, that is what today is about.”