Foundation receives $300,000 loan for tourism project

By HOWARD J. GASTY JR. Special to The Advocate

DONALDSONVILLE — The Commission Council will loan the Fort Butler Foundation $300,000 to bring a replica of a 17th century French warship to Donaldsonville's waterfront for tourist attraction.

The council voted 4-1 Monday night in favor of the loan, with Commissioner of Finance Guy Poche opposed. He said the city's budget is just too tight.

"You've been in all the audit meetings about the budget," Poche said. "This is a big decision on your part, guys." Mayor Raymond Jacobs said he favored making the loan because the council needs to take advantage of the opportunity. "I second that," Commissioner Anthony "Tony" Huey said.

Le Pelican is a replica of the vessel first launched by the French in 1699, Captain Carl Capone, chairman of the city Planning and Zoning Commission said. The Fort Butler Foundation brings together people interested in the history of the Donaldsonville area and those who wish to further the city's riverfront development. The foundation wants to use the ship to anchor a $2.75 million tourism attraction complex.

Backers envision the gift with the museum, gift shop, museum, stage and amphitheater, boardwalk, dock and landing, all clustered in a parklike setting, Capone said.

The project already received $100,000 in grants and a $30,000 commitment from U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., consultant Dennis Mitchell of Glenn Shehee & Associates, Inc., said. Le Pelican, presently docked at Bolinger Shipyards in Harvey, is 176 feet in length and has a 35-foot beam. It cost $15 million to build and 20 years to complete. The building alone cost $6 million.

Projections show the project could draw 50,000 visitors, or 142 people per day on a slow day, with ticket prices between $3 and $6.

On the advice of the city's financial advisors, the council agreed to spread the $300,000 loan over a 10-year time frame to allow for interest payments only. After the sixth year, a lump sum payment on the principal will fall due. In other matters Monday, the council:

- Agreed to begin accepting Entergy utility payments at the City Office, effective immediate.
- Approved to place the 2007-2008 Audit Report order for $5,200.
- Approved to extend a lease for the North City Hall building.
- Approved the proposal for the City's 2008 Budget.
- Approved a contract with Consolidated Sewerage.
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