Owners’ OK vital to clear bayous

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BAKER — A project to clear Brushy Bayou and White Bayou of trees and other vegetation hinges on the willingness of property owners to allow access to the streams, city-parish officials said this week.

The city-parish Department of Public Works needs access to the bayous from 105 property owners and permission to cut trees that impede drainage in the watersheds.

As of Thursday, only 16 had signed up, Public Works Director Fred Raiford said.

Opposition to the plan surfaced at an informational meeting last week called by District 1 Metro Councilwoman Roxson Welch, with some landowners demanding to be paid for large trees along the bank if they are removed.

Raiford and Welch said the Metro Council had appropriated only $400,000 in riverboat casino revenue to begin the project, and no money is available to pay for access or for trees.

“We’re not going to expropriate any right of way,” Raiford said during the meeting, which was videotaped by a Baker city councilman.

Welch said the project was developed in response to flash flooding in parts of Baker and surrounding areas because the streams cannot move the water to the Comite River fast enough.

Clearing brush and trees from the channels will help alleviate some flash flooding, but the project will not prevent flooding when the Comite backs up into the two tributaries, Welch and Raiford said. Raiford said the project, which will be carried out by a contractor through competitive bidding, will help move water out of the Baker area before the river causes backwater flooding.

The two said $400,000 will not cover the complete cost of cleaning the canal from the Comite north through Baker, but the work can be done in phases as more funds become available.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has issued a wetlands permit for the project, but it limits the scope of the work to clearing trees and debris in the channel, Raiford said.

He said the contractor will chip the trees whenever possible, spread the chips along the banks, and haul away or burn some debris when the work sites are in remote areas.

In addition to permission to work in the channel, the city-parish is asking for the “right of entry” along the banks to maintain the improvements, such as spraying new vegetation with herbicide.

Raiford told the landowners attending the meeting he would be willing to walk the canal with each of them individually to narrowly define the limits within which the contractor or city-parish workers could operate equipment.

Donna Day, who spoke against the project at the meeting, said she is torn between wanting to help her neighbors who flood and wanting to protect valuable trees on her property. “I have hundred-year-old oaks on the banks. They’re not cutting my trees,” she said Friday.

Day, who lives off Plank Road, said the “right of entry” form the city-parish is asking landowners to sign “asks us to give blanket access to our property of a year.”

“I’m hesitant because I don’t know who’s doing the work or who determines what is necessary for access.” Is it the contractor, the foreman and somebody operating a bulldozer?” she said.

Raiford said his department will begin setting up meetings this month with individual landowners to inspect their property and try to reach agreements on how much access is needed.

Welch said she does not know how many reluctant property owners it would take to scuttle the project. “We’ve got a long way to go,” she said.