Leaders point to riverboat's economic impact

By Dunstan Prial

Riverboat gambling could generate a $22 million direct economic impact in Lafayette, according to a Lake Charles study reviewing the impact statewide.

A number of local civic leaders said Friday that, given these projections, area legislators should fight to give Lafayette the opportunity to have riverboat gambling.

In addition, the city could expect to add perhaps 2,000 jobs in the hospitality and construction industries.

A study of the economic impact of riverboat gambling on several Louisiana cities projected those kinds of numbers for Lake Charles, a city similar in size to Lafayette.

Rep. Raymond "La La" Lalonde has proposed legislation that would add the Vermilion river to the list of state waterways that could offer riverboat gambling.

Lafayette was left off the original legislation which was passed in 1991. It added the Vermilion to the original list of the Mississippi, Red, Calcasieu, Mermentau, Ouachita and Atchafalaya rivers, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, Bayou Bienvenu, Lake Pontchartrain, Lake Charles, Lake Maurepas and the Intracoastal Waterway.

(The Riverboat Gaming Act and Video Poker Bill were passed during the Roemer administration in 1991.)

The bill "would just mean that the Lafayette area would not be left out if dockside ever became legal," he said.

Mayor Kenny Bowen said, "I will always fight for the economic well-being of Lafayette. I don't like Lafayette being excluded from legislation passed in 1991 which gave opportunities for Shreveport, Baton Rouge, Lake Charles and several other communities. I want Lafayette to have that same opportunity."

"This is not a moral issue. It is an economic issue. If you want to gamble, it is your right. If not, don't. But I have to protect Lafayette's interests," the mayor added.

Kenny Bowen

Please see Leaders, A-6
Leaders: Point to riverboat

Bowen said he did not want Lafayette citizens leaving to go to Lake Arthur, Baton Rouge and Lake Charles for gaming entertainment. "Baton Rouge has two boats already approved. There are plans on the table to put riverboat gaming in Lake Arthur and Lake Charles. The City of Lafayette does not promote gambling, but we do protect our interests. It is in our best economic interests to be competitive with other areas of the state."

Bowen said he had already heard of large numbers of Lafayette and Acadiana residents driving to Mississippi to gamble. "The issue is should Lafayette be competitive with the other areas. I say yes and I will fight for Lafayette."

Gerald Breaux, executive director of the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission, said dockside gambling is another attraction Lafayette could offer tourists.

"It's an addition to the marketing mix we already have," he said, citing the Evangeline Downs race track as a similar draw.

Breaux noted that he was expressing his own opinion. The issue of dockside gambling has not been discussed by the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission. "Without a doubt, the (riverboat gambling) industry will bring a lot to Lafayette," said Hal Beridon, manager of the Lafayette Hilton, and a past president of the Louisiana Hotel-Motel Association.

Beridon noted that Evangeline Downs has proven beneficial to the local economy. Riverboat gambling has the added attraction of acting as an incentive to keep tourists in Lafayette overnight, he said.

"It would be a real plus for the hotel industry," he said.

Beridon questioned why Lafayette wasn't added to the legislation passed last year which allowed riverboat gambling in other areas of the state.

District Attorney Nathan Stansbury, speaking as a private citizen, said Lafayette could easily compete with riverboat casinos in Baton Rouge and Mermentau because Lafayette has so much to offer.

"Economically, this is something we need to do," he said. "People (already) like to come to Lafayette. We have great food here."

Lake Charles was included in a statewide impact study of riverboat gambling commissioned by the Louisiana Rivers Development Council. The study projected an annual economic boost to Lake Charles of $22 million. Also, according to the study, riverboat gambling would create nearly 2,000 jobs in the city.

Lake Charles' local tax revenue could increase by more than $3.5 million, the study states. That includes $198,000 in hotel-motel taxes, $226,000 in sales taxes, $472,000 in property taxes, and $2.6 million in local gambling and riverboat head taxes.

George Brown, a lobbyist for the Louisiana Rivers Development Council, said that if Lafayette is added to the list, it would be good for the city and the entire region. He said tourists attracted to riverboats are much more likely to be sightseers and are more interested in the history and attractions of a region than are casino visitors.