Scenic designation could prove profitable

By Jonas Breaux
Staff Writer

Creation of a scenic byway stretching from Breaux Bridge along La. 31 to Morgan City could mean millions of dollars annually for rural communities in St. Martin, Iberia and St. Mary parishes.

According to the chairman of the Capital Resource, Conservation and Development Council, which helped develop the state’s first “designated scenic byway,” the economic impact of a byway on rural communities is significant.

“A good federal designation of byways is approximately $50,000 per mile, per year,” said Capital RC&D chairman Danny Clement. “When you consider that there are 500 miles in our byway, the economic impact is unbelievable.”

“The Bayou Byway, which encompasses 13 Florida parishes in the Baton Rouge area, was designated the state’s first scenic byway in 1992. Clement said it is important to have the state designation because without it, byways will not be eligible for a similar federal classification, to be issued next year.

“In 1995, the federal government will begin designating byways as being National Scenic Byways,” Clement said. “But, to receive the federal designation, you must first be designated as a state byway.

“Having the national designation is very important because it will mean additional funding for development and advertising,” he said. “Once the national byway designation is received, it will enable the byway to apply for the ultimate federal designation of “All-American Road.”

Clement said the All-American Road classification would bring “recognitions” for the byway on a national and international basis.

Robert Vernon, with the National Parks Service, said byways developed across the country as a means of pulling tourists off of interstate highways and into rural communities.

“The nation’s interstate system is all but completed,” Vernon said. “And now the direction of the federal government is toward finding ways to pull tourists off of these major highways into rural areas.”

Vernon said national statistics indicate that the “recreational trend” is shifting away from major metropolitan areas and towards “close-to-home” recreational opportunities.

Louisiana already has two state designated scenic byways, the Bayou Byway in the Florida parishes and the Calcasieu-Creole Byway running from coastal Cameron Parish up through Calcasieu Parish.

“The emphasis of the national byways program is to preserve and highlight scenic, cultural and historic opportunities along the byway,” Vernon said.

“The Acadiana project is a natural for the byways program. Acadiana is culturally significant with or without the byway.”

“Having a byway in place would serve as another way to highlight the Acadiana experience,” he said.

If all goes according to plan, the Acadiana byway could be added to the state list sometime this month, said Dawn Hebert, with the Development Group, a consulting firm developing a Corridor Management Plan for the three Acadiana parishes.

“The tri-parish area has recently received national exposure as a must-see tourist attraction,” Hebert said. “Articles on a route following Bayou Teche from Breaux Bridge to the coast recently appeared in editions of the National Geographic Travel, U.S. News and World Report and Reader’s Digest magazines.

“All this coverage is coming without a scenic byways designation,” she said.

“With state and federal designations, this type of coverage would only multiply.”