The Basin blues

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ST. MARTINVILLE - The Atchafalaya Basin could be drained and paved by now, were it not for a 61-year effort to save it. Now the largest freshwater swamp in the United States is on the verge of a $350 million restoration and protection project on a scale equal to that of saving the Grand Canyon.

The Basin was largely undisturbed until 1927, when the Great Flood sent water from the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers to inundate thousands of South Louisiana acres. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was called in, and one of the results is the levee system that holds the Basin in check, protecting the farms, towns and cities that ring its coastline.

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First, it got smaller. Fully a third of its northern section was drained for farming and ranching. Then came the oilmen - wildcatters and huge conglomerates alike - who proceeded to cut trenches and canals for their equipment barges through out the 700,000-acre wilderness.

From the air the zig-zag patterns can be seen for miles, an angled network of straight trenches that took out centuries of ancient forests and allowed the intrusion of saltwater from the Gulf of Mexico and its accompanying pollution.

Hunting leases granted by the state gob bled up thousands of acres. Thousands more were sold and resold, sometimes for very little cash being exchanged. Mineral rights cover the Basin more than the water does. And a big chunk of the restoration money will be spent to buy back this land.

Now many have questions. Who owns the Basin? What do they own? And how much money will they make when they sell the swamp to the government, or in any of the adjacent land deals that are expected to follow implementation of the Master Plan?

No answers yet, however, for the Atchafalaya Basin Master Plan are in as much flux as the swamp it is designed to protect. It's just not a done deal, beginning three years, until this year. The opposition was anticipated, and it looks like the opponents will get their wish.

The city tried to talk the state into leasing - again, for nothing - about 600 more feet of the park. Moreover, the state has plans to pump $2 million more into the park, something that hasn't been done in years. It took five years for half the park to re-open after Hurricane Andrew. A pavilion used for group outings caught fire and remained a charred skeleton for three years, until this year.

"We just want to benefit from the RV park, wherever it is, as long as it's on the bayou," Fuselier said Friday. "We still have a year or two before monies come from the state. I mean, we're dealing with plans that are changing, we're dealing with money, we're dealing with the state."

Basin

with the 1999 Legislature, which is expected to approve the state's $85 million share of the project when it convenes in March.

The minutiae of the Atchafalaya Basin restoration project grow large when examined up close. They point to the emerging nature of the Master Plan.

A city council member in St. Martinville, a town planning to take advantage of the Basin's renaissance, says their position is simple.

He says, in effect, "The Basin is the engine beneath Louisiana's burgeoning ecotourism market, right? If Cajun cool is cool, then that makes us real cool. And we're the epicenter of the birthplace of Acadiana, we're ground zero. So go figure."

A million and a half million dollars, more or less, are slated for use in St. Martinville. This is not a lot in the grand design, but more than enough to attract the interest of local politicians. About $200,000 will go toward restoration of the circa 1930s Opera House downtown. But it's the Bayou Teche that's the draw, says Councilman Mike Fuselier, a public school teacher in Catahoula and St. Martinville native who serves District 1.

St. Martinville was blessed in 1935 with Louisiana's first official state park. Known today as the Longfellow-Evangeline State Commemorative Area, it sits on the banks of Bayou Teche in downtown St. Martinville, an idyllic setting graced by the Longfellow-Evangeline State Commemorative Area. It is the engine beneath Louisiana's burgeoning ecotourism market, right? If Cajun cool is cool, then that makes us real cool. And we're the epicenter of the birthplace of Acadiana, we're ground zero. So go figure.

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The city tried to talk the state into leasing - again, for nothing - about 600 more feet of the bayou, in the confines of the state park. That's where the RV park was to have been. The state said no, so the city is looking to buy more land on the bayou elsewhere, maybe across the bayou, where cows now graze.

Fuselier understands the state's refusal. An RV park wouldn't mesh with the ambiance of the quaint Cajun setting of the park. Moreover, the state has plans to pump $2 million more into the park, something that hasn't been done in years.

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