

Tourism, State Officials Visit City

By Betty Adams

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Greg Butts, parks director for the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism, gave the House and Senate Interim Committee on Agriculture, Forestry and Economic Development an update on the Delta Heritage Trail State Park and the proposed Mississippi River State Park at their meeting Thursday morning. The meeting was held in the Delta Eagle Room of the Delta Cultural Center's Depot building.

Butts said plans for the Mississippi River State Park actually began 32 years ago. The U.S. Forestry Service and the State Park Commission are partnering the project. The St. Francis National Forest, where the park will be constructed, covers 22,600 acres and the camping areas will be managed by the state park system. A special use permit, which was signed Oct. 26, 2004, will move the project along with the proposed development area being at Storm Creek and Bear Creek.

Some of the projects will include housing for management, two visitors' centers, upgrading the maintenance areas and the picnic sites. It also will provide accessibility for the handicapped, make improvements to the camping areas, a children' playground, enclosed pavilions, bath houses, proposed camping cabins at both lakes, elevation lookouts and boardwalks.

Phase 2 of the project will include a boat ramp at the confluence of the St. Francis and Mississippi rivers, constructing overnight cabins, five at the north end of Bear Creek and possibly as many as 15 around Storm Creek, new fishing ramps, piers and handicap ramps.

Butts said the Delta Heritage Trail State Park was one of the first of its kind constructed and said that there is a lot to see along the trail and here in eastern Arkansas.

"There are a lot of archeological and historical things to be found here and I feel the Helena-West Helena area has a really bright future," he said.

In 1990, the Union Pacific Railroad abandoned their line from Helena Junction to Cypress Bend and in 1992, the state parks system acquired 73 miles of old rail line. In April this year, the department will begin taking bids on the proposed construction of another 8 1/2 miles of trail

located south of Barton. Also, a visitor's center and park are located at the Barton site in the historic Wayside Gin.

Richard Davies, director of state Department of Parks and Tourism, showed an eight-minute video about how important the hospitality industry is in the state.

"Visitors spend \$4 billion in the state each year on lodging, goods and services," he said. "The state collects a tourism tax which really boosts the state's revenues."

Barbara King, president of the Phillips County Chamber of Commerce greeted the group of senators and parks and tourism officials.

"We are really pleased with you meeting in our new city, Helena-West Helena, and pleased with the opportunity to showcase the good things we are doing here to improve economic development and the quality of life for our citizens," she said.

King explained the Delta Bridge Project, which was created over a 10-month planning session conducted by 300 Phillips County residents. The purpose of the project, said King, was to help Helena-West Helena determine how to become a model community and to establish economic development in the Delta.

Paula Oliver, Main Street Helena director, and Katie Harrington, Delta Cultural Center director, gave an update on the tourism component and the strategic plans for this area.

"One of our major goals we are working on is improving the entrance to the community from the Helena Bridge to the downtown area. Southern Bancorp has been busy conducting clean-up operations in that area and plans on developing a park like area," Oliver explained. "We are also trying to develop the downtown area, and expand the river-park and eco-tourism, increase special events held in downtown, and include community development with other communities."

"We are working on creating a Delta Image Campaign and are working to create our own identify, as it is really important on how we market our area," continued Oliver.

"The American Land Conservancy has bought a 1,500-acre island just across from the river park and possibly, we could tie this in with the state park and the downtown area, " said Oliver.

"It is really exciting that the community realizes the advantages we have here in Helena-West Helena," added Harrington.

When asked about how the name change of the King Biscuit Blues Festival would affect the festival, Oliver replied, "We are getting a lot of support from the musicians, artists, vendors and fans in general and the Memphis festival will not be free like our festival." "They will not have the atmosphere we have here and in the long run I don't think their festival will actually hurt us," added Oliver in reference to the proposed Memphis festival, which will carry the KBBF name.

Tom Turner, executive director of the Phillips County Chamber of Commerce, who was responsible for getting the group to meet here, said the Chamber's main focus is job creation and economic development.

"Our mission is to serve as a catalyst and one of our primary focuses is tourism development," he said. "Hospitality and tourism can not be automated, it is a face to face industry. We are concentrating on tourism, business extension and expansion and finding out what our industries want and how to make sure they stay here."

"One thing we would like to see is the state being more aggressive in trying to get investors from out of state, interested in Arkansas. In addition, we need to pursue more service-type industries," he added.

"What was the bonding deal that caused the two towns to finally come together?" asked Rep. Johnnie Bolin.

"We finally reached what is known as the tipping point. The political situation was in shambles and the entire community was ready for government reform and in setting a course for the future of this community," replied Turner.

Pat Audrisch, chair of the Tourism and Business Initiative of Eastern Arkansas told how their group "The Gladlands" was formed in October 2002 to stimulate economic development and improve the quality of life for the citizens of Lee and St. Francis counties. The seed money for their project was provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which focuses on health, food systems, rural development, youth, education, philanthropic and volunteerism.