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After two-year delay, state park project on track

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In June of 2005, local and state officials gathered at the site of the proposed Bogue Chitto State Park, an expanse of nearly 1,800 acres located mostly between the Bogue Chitto River and La. Hwy. 25 just north of Folsom in Washington Parish.

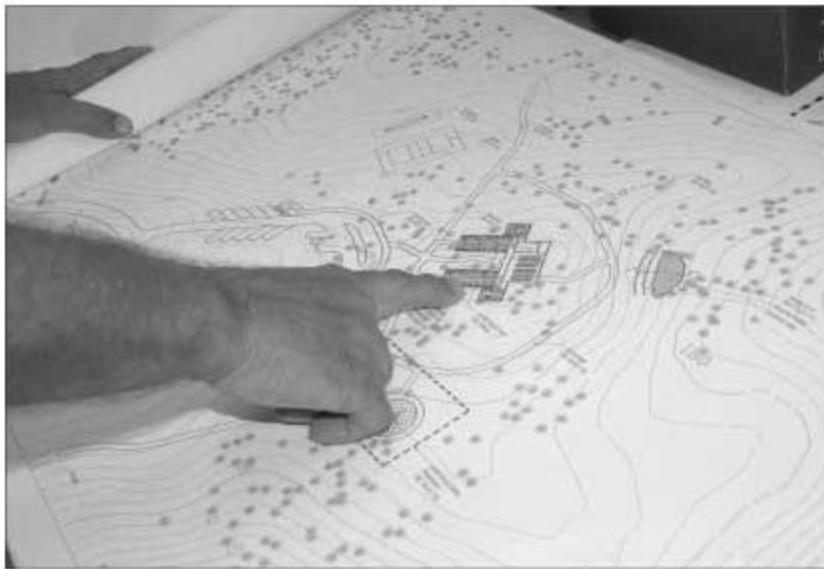
The dignitaries were there to announce and celebrate progress on what was

expected to be "a premiere state park." It was hoped that bids would go out that fall and that construction would begin by early the following year.

Two months later, Hurricane Katrina blew all schedules into a holding pattern. But now the bids are in, and State Sen. Ben Nevers said if he and Rep. Harold Ritchie can secure an additional \$5 million from the state's Capital Outlay Budget this month, the project



DAILY NEWS PHOTO/Marcelle Hanemann
Sen. Ben Nevers of Bogalusa looks at plans for Bogue Chitto State Park.



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will move forward.

The land has been purchased, and a state appropriation of \$13,990,000 has been secured for construction, he said. But it will take a bit more to move ahead.

"We've got to have at least \$15,160,000 for the base bid before we can award the contract," said Nevers. "If we can get the base and alternate one funded, we could try to get alternates two and three funded in next year's budget."

Arrighi Simoneaux submitted the low bid of \$21,680,000 for the whole project. Of that total, \$15,160,000 is the base bid, and the rest covers the three alternates, each at a cost of more than \$2 million.

Alternate One covers construction of the park's visitors' center. Alternate Two covers construction of lowland cabins. And Alternate Three covers construction of the lodging buildings and the large group camp.

Nevers said Simoneaux has "agreed to hold the bid through the end of September" to enable the local contingent to request more funding.

Even though the park must compete with hurricane recovery-related and other projects for limited state funding, the relatively small dollar amount of the current request and the fact that so much has already been done are in its favor, said Nevers.

"Because it's already been bid and it's so close I feel the park has a good chance of getting funded," he said.

And if it is funded, it could be open for business before long. The bid for the total project gives a 540-day construction period.

"In a year and a half, we could have a new state park," said Nevers. "It's an exciting project."

The Bogue Chitto will be more than a typical state park. Nevers said it will be "a premiere park" if not "the" premiere park in the state system.

The terrain alone is extraordinary, with a 120-foot change in elevation from boggy, lowland areas to forested highlands. The park will enable visitors to experience a diversity of plant communities, wildlife and habitats that include natural sandbars, lakes, sand dunes, small streams, cypress tupelo swamps, a hardwood-forested gorge, bayhead swamps and upland forests.

The plan is to keep the widely diverse terrain as close as possible to its natural state while making it easily accessible to the public.

There will be nine miles of walking trails and more than seven miles of equestrian trails.

Ten existing lakes that cover a total 32 acres will be available for fishing and canoeing, and visitors will also be able to canoe or tube along the river.

According to the plans developed by Fauntleroy and Latham, the Bogue Chitto State Park will offer fishing piers, canoe launch pavilions, a beach pavilion, an interactive water play area, an amphitheatre, group gathering pavilions and children's play areas.

Interpretive Areas will be located at "points of interest" throughout the park with informational signs to help educate the public.

A visitor's center, located on a bluff with a large viewing deck, will be available for conferences, classes and meetings. It will house an interpretive center with an interpretive/display area, a sales area and a naturalists office.

Camping opportunities will include primitive, RV, cabins and even small and large group camps. There will be both upland and bottomland sites, situated to help users feel alone with nature. For example, cabins will be located 100 to 200 feet apart and oriented to open upon natural vistas.

The Bogue Chitto will surely attract visitors from across the state and beyond, but local folks will only need to take a short drive from Franklinton or an even shorter one from Folsom to experience what is expected to be the jewel of Louisiana's state park system.