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## Woodlands Trail moves step closer to reality

Some object to park in natural habitat

Sunday, June 12, 2005

By **Brian Friedman**  
Contributing writer

Over the past seven years, Algiers resident Katie Brasted has fought to turn 10,000 acres of wilderness in Orleans and Plaquemines parishes into a public park with hiking, bicycling and horseback-riding trails.

On June 4, she hit a milestone in those plans as she celebrated National Trails Day at the Belle Chasse site, where development will soon begin on the trails.

Brasted used the occasion to recognize the support she's received from private donors, government officials including Plaquemines Parish President Benny Rousselle, organizations such as the Algiers Economic Development Foundation, and corporations including Chevron, ConocoPhillips and Wal-Mart.

Wildlife experts say the preservation of the forest is crucial for migratory bird habitat, and business leaders have said the proposed Woodlands Trail and Park could cash in on the growing ecotourism industry.

Meanwhile, Carl Bauer, history professor at Our Lady of Holy Cross College, is using the World War II era bunkers and railways within the proposed park as the centerpiece for a study of military history.

### Concern for wildlife

But at the National Trails Day event it was clear that Brasted has some opposition to the plans.

Members of the English Turn Civic Improvement Association, a civic group in Lower Coast Algiers, protested the event.

"We are very much opposed to the trail, and we have many reasons that we are," said Frances Sewell, president of the association.

"We do not want a commercialized trail to go through that park because it's going to interfere with the wildlife," Sewell said. "It's the only park that we feel is for the animals, and as the (English Turn) gated community continues to build, that's the area that our animals are retreating to."

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Brasted, however, sees the park as a way of preserving the land -- one of the region's last stands of bottomland hardwood forest as well as a habitat for migratory birds -- from further commercial development.

"What we are proposing is smart growth," Brasted said. "Development will occur. I guess I would rather share (the land) than lose it."

"It's a very important habitat for wildlife, especially neotropical migratory birds, both as a breeding area and also as a staging area for migrants coming across the Gulf in the spring, or planning to fly south across the Gulf in the fall," said David Muth, vice president of the Orleans Audubon Society, who led one of National Trails Day hikes.

Barbara Benson of Providence Engineering and Environmental Group, chief engineer for the project, said the encroaching effects of the park would be minimal.

"During my engineering design, I tried to minimize impacts as much as possible to the natural environment," Benson said. "I used as much as possible existing corridors (for the park's pathways), and I tried to stay to the highest locations, the highest elevations, so I could avoid wetlands."

Sewell also fears that the park will have a disruptive effect on the English Turn community.

"As (the trail) opens up over in Belle Chasse, it opens up into an area where there are no homes," Sewell said, "but when it comes out over here, it is coming out within our community, and we don't want that. We want our peace and tranquility to be preserved as well."

Support for plan

Others in Algiers and Plaquemines have expressed support for Brasted's plans.

Joanne Gray with the Friends of Lower Coast, a new civic association in the area, said she thinks the project will benefit local families.

"I have three children, and we ride our bikes on the levee, but a lot of times we ride on the street," Gray said. "I'm very cautious of them riding on the street, and I think it would be very nice to have paths that they could ride on. That's how we look at it, as activities for the community."

Bauer, of Our Lady of Holy Cross College, said his students are getting experience documenting the history of the site.

"Right now, we're involved with the oral history aspects of the project, trying to get the stories of individuals who were stationed at the various military installations there," he said.

"It was an ideal thing for the (college's) history department to get involved in the Woodlands project, because we believe there are some important stories that need to be memorialized; plus it's an opportunity for my students to get some very valuable field work."

Economic development officials see the area as a potential draw for tourists interested in local wildlife.


"The Algiers Economic Development Foundation has come out in full support of the development as we know it," said Kathy Lynn Honaker, the AEDF's

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executive director, "because we feel that it's an economic development tool that will bring people to the Algiers area."

Plaquemines officials have been particularly supportive of the Woodlands plans. Brasted said the Plaquemines Parish Council passed resolutions in 2000 and 2004 supporting the project, and in 2002, the council passed a resolution supporting Woodlands' application for state financing.

Also in 2002, Rousselle allocated federal money to finance an environmental assessment of the park, Brasted said.

"I think it's a project that's very much needed," Rousselle said Wednesday. "With the rapid development of the northern part of the parish, especially the Belle Chasse area, if we don't take a stand and set aside some green space, it will all be developed, and we'll have no place left to save some green space."

#### Walking in the woods

Nature lovers who attended the National Trails Day event focused their attention on the forest as a wildlife habitat.

For Muth and other Woodlands Trail and Park supporters, preserving the area is key to leaving a natural legacy for future generations. "It's really just a matter of saving some green space in this city because it's rapidly, rapidly, rapidly disappearing everywhere you go."

"I think it's great, because it's better than having houses put in," said Kevin Herridge, a hiker and nature enthusiast from Algiers. "There's not much of this forest left, and by putting a trail in there, it stops people from chopping their own way through, and it lets people experience a hardwood forest and see the trees and birds and things we saw today, which you wouldn't normally see."

"Having trails and having a place for people to walk and ride horses and just experience a little bit of natural Louisiana is just a great thing," he said, "and we don't have enough of it."

Visitors look up for a Carolina warbler during a National Trails Day celebration at the Woodlands Trail in Belle Chasse on June 4. They were in an area of 100- to 150-year-old cypress trees. [1654668]

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