

# Walking, bike trail upgraded

## Tammany Trace adds entryways; bridge replaced

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ABITA SPRINGS — Tammany Trace, the 31-mile bike path that links Covington to Slidell, experienced upgrades this spring as two cities have opened expensive new entryways to the trail and the parish government replaced a dilapidated bridge.

For 15 years, parish and municipal governments have worked to build, piece by piece, the Trace, the only rail line in the state that's been converted into an asphalt paved bike and hiking trail. Currently, the path meanders through the back yards of pine tree-covered subdivisions and across several bayous and canals.

When the St. Tammany Parish government purchased the old Illinois Central Railroad rail line in 1992 for \$1.4 million, each municipality along the trail was asked to come up with its own plans for new entry points, or trailheads as they're known, Parish President Kevin Davis said.

"I didn't want to tell other people how to envision their part," Davis said.

Mandeville built its trailhead first, but Abita Springs and Covington have finished theirs, and Slidell is up next.

Into its \$500,000 trailhead project Abita Springs is incorporating the town's history. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the town served as a resort for New Orleans residents attempting to escape the summertime yellow fever epidemics, Mayor Louis Fitzmorris said.

At its peak, Abita Springs had more than 500 hotels as tourists flocked to the town's famous natural springs and to breathe the pine-scented air that was once believed to prevent illnesses like yellow fever, he said.

The bachelor quarters for the old Long Branch Hotel was moved to the town's park along the Abita River and converted into a museum that opened in April, Fitzmorris said. A pavilion that dates to the 1880s and was damaged during Hurricane Katrina was repaired and moved to the site as well, Fitzmorris said.

The Abita Springs trailhead, is part of a town park and the town plans to open a water spray playground in July.

Noting that tourists once took a boat to Mandeville, then the train into Abita Springs, Fitzmorris said that tourists are returning to ride their bicycles.

"That's what's been great about the Trace," Fitzmorris said. "These old rail tracks brought people into town, and, once again, it's bringing people back into Abita. Springs."

The city of Covington unveiled a \$1.6 million trailhead on Friday that includes an amphitheater, covered market area, a clock tower, restrooms, a water spray playground and a visitor center, said Pam Keller, the city's economic development director.

Covington's new trailhead emphasizes the railroad area and the city's one-time dependence on that mode of transportation, she said.

The idea was hatched nine years ago and its realization was funded partly through grants, such as a \$225,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, she said.

Sometime next month, the parish will unveil a new \$1.9 million drawbridge over Bayou Lacombe that connects the Lacombe and Slidell portions of the trail, Davis said.

The drawbridge, which will be lowered during daylight hours to allow for trail users to go across, will replace a dilapidated, unusable one, Davis said. A ranger will be available during the day to raise the bridge for boat traffic.

Future plans call for the parish to convert Camp Salmen, a 106-acre former Boy Scout camp on Bayou Liberty in Slidell, into a recreational center along the Trace, Davis said. The idea is to have trails going throughout the camp.

The Trace terminates at Airport Road in Slidell, but once Slidell designs and plans its trailhead at Heritage Park, the parish will help bring the Trace into the city as well, Davis said.