

National recreation plan includes county

By JOHN LOWMAN | Posted: Wednesday, December 14, 2011 2:00 am

LAKE JACKSON — Creating a national recreation area involving Brazoria and three other Gulf Coast counties will take an act of Congress, but that's a step organizers are preparing to take.

Tentatively named the Lone Star Coastal National Recreation Area, non-contiguous land would stretch from the mouth of the Colorado River in Matagorda County north to High Island in Chambers County, according to a press release from Houston Wilderness. Land isn't just along the immediate coast, but stretches several miles inland.

Houston Wilderness already helps facilitate the Sam Houston Greenbelt, a "belt" of undeveloped land encircling Houston and connecting existing parks, refuges, beaches and waterways in 11 counties.

Designation as a national recreation area would open the door for federal development grants while keeping public lands open and private lands private, Brazoria County Pct. 1 Commissioner Donald "Dude" Payne said. Some lower-lying land would be set aside as hurricane flood abatement and coastal conservation areas, Houston Wilderness CEO John Cronin said.

"It would not hinder development any more than if you were dealing with wetland issues now," Payne said. "It will give us the ability to get more federal dollars to spend on these recreational areas."

Those dollars could be used for bird-watching, hike-and-bike trails, kayaking areas, hunting and fishing and other uses, Cronin said.

The concept was introduced at a January meeting in Galveston and subsequent meetings have taken place around the region.

"Some chambers of commerce didn't want to support it if it would hinder development — if it would keep them from starting a subdivision or putting in a mall," Payne said. "We're told it will not hinder that."

Former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker, III and Houston businessman John L. Nau, III are part of the committee working toward the area. There will be no "land grab" associated with the designation, and property use will continue as it has been, Cronin said.

"If someone doesn't want to be a part of it, they don't have to," Cronin said. "Business and land owners will delineate the boundaries."

One owner could opt in and a neighbor choose not to, Cronin said. If the neighbor decides later to become part of the area, they can. Hunting, fishing and crabbing will not only be allowed in some areas, but land would be set aside for those pursuits, Cronin said.

City and county officials would make choices for their areas, and public hearings would take place well before any land is designated for any specific purpose, he said.

“You could designate anything you want,” Cronin said. “Locals would decide what this would look like. If there’s cattle on the land and that’s the historic use of the land, there’s no reason to believe the livestock would be pulled off that land.”

The plan also calls for hurricane abatement and conservation components, Cronin said. The flood abatement plan is being developed at Rice University and like the rest of the proposal, isn’t yet complete, he said.

The plan likely will discourage development in wetlands and areas “five or six feet below sea level,” Cronin said.

“We’re trying to start that debate,” he said. “Mother Nature has put tens of thousands of acres there for tidal surge. It’s not about dissuading development, it’s about using good, sustainable partnerships when we do things.”

There are fewer than 20 national recreational areas in the United States, including Amistad National Recreation Area near Del Rio and Lake Meredith National Recreation Area in the Panhandle.

No details are yet available for the current coastal proposal, but officials will release information as they get it, Payne said. Information on the concept is at <http://houstonwilderness.org/index.php/NationalRecreationArea/index2>.

“We’re waiting to see if we get the national recreational area designation and see what the steps are,” Payne said. “This isn’t going to happen overnight.”

Cronin is confident the proposal will move forward.

“It literally takes an act of Congress to get that designation,” he said. “If we were in a football game, we’d be in the first quarter right now.”