

Study finds Gulf Coast storm buffer would create jobs

By Harvey Rice, Houston Chronicle

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GALVESTON —The proposed Lone Star Coastal National Recreation Area not only would act as a Houston-area storm buffer, but would triple tourism and quadruple its economic impact in a decade, according to a study released Wednesday.

A national recreation area spanning Chambers, Galveston, Brazoria and Matagorda counties would attract 500,000 visitors its first year, create 1,200 jobs and \$46 million in local sales, according to the study sponsored by the **National Parks Conservation Association, Houston Wilderness and Rice University's Severe Storm Prediction, Education and Evacuation from Disasters Center.**

Those numbers would rise to 1.5 million tourists, 5,260 jobs and \$192 million in sales by the 10th year, according to the study by the **Harbinger Consulting Group.**

Among the benefits the study found were offering greater recognition in national and international markets; allowing tourist destinations within the four-county area to share marketing; and making it easier to attract nonprofit, corporate and federal money. National Parks Conservation Association representatives met with at least 50 officials in the four counties to explain the proposal during the study, said Suzanne Dixon, Texas regional director for the association. "So far we haven't had any pushback," Dixon said, after officials learned that participation by private landowners is voluntary. "If you want to be part of the national recreation area you can, and if you don't, you don't."

Attractions like Galveston County's Fort Travis on the Bolivar Peninsula or the city of Galveston's nature preserve, the East End Lagoon, could be made part of the national recreation area, making them eligible for federal money and U.S. Park Service management, Dixon said. Neither the county nor the city would give up ownership and would participate in fashioning the rules under which the parks would be operated, she said.

No initial tax money

No tax money would be used in the creation of a national recreation area, Dixon said. Taxpayer money would come only in the form of federal dollars once the U.S. **National Park Service** became involved, she said. How much federal money would be used would depend on the extent of Park Service involvement, she said.

The 130-mile national recreation area was proposed in November as one of four projects to protect the Houston area from storm surges like the one spawned by Hurricane Ike in 2008. The proposal said a national recreation area would preserve wetlands, absorb water from a storm surge and improve tourism by linking attractions such as historic sites, bird watching, kayaking, hiking, hunting and fishing.

Last month former Secretary of State **James A. Baker III** and influential Houston businessman **John L. Nau** announced the formation of a steering committee to develop the recreation area concept and gather local support.

Diverse board

The governing rules would be made by a board with representatives from local, state and federal governments and private interests, Dixon said. She said the successful Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area operates with representatives from 200 private and governmental bodies.

Dixon said creation of the national recreation area requires an act of Congress, and she expected that the association would begin approaching members of the Texas delegation within a year to enlist their support.

Before enlisting such support, the association will begin an information campaign to ensure public backing, she said.

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