

# Arkansas City

**33° 36' 32" N**

**91° 12' 13" W**



**DESHA COUNTY • ARKANSAS**





There's a saying in life about getting knocked down and trying to land on your back. Because that way, if you are looking up it's easier to get up.

Arkansas City, in Desha County, Arkansas, got knocked down by the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. It was a painful blow, and its people paid a hefty price. This once mighty trade and cultural center became forgotten and left behind. Arkansas City could've easily just have been lost forever, but thankfully its few hundred residents didn't just lie down. Arkansas City got back up—Slowly, but it did. Efforts to re-develop the tiny town would not end.

One of its most recent victories is the Delta Heritage Trail. The planned 84.5-mile bike and pedestrian trail weaves through the Arkansas Delta hardwood forest, miles of rich farmland and oxbow lakes. The final 40 miles connecting the two completed trail sections should be finished by 2025 thanks to a \$40 million investment split between the Walton Family Foundation and federal grant money. It's expected this trail will create 600 jobs and add a much-needed spark to local tourism revenue.

Additionally, there is the Freddie Black Choctaw Island Wildlife Management Area. It's not a true island, but it's a real gem. Covering nearly 8,000 public acres, this land within the levees of the Mississippi River provides one of the largest watersheds in the world.

To better understand Arkansas City, perhaps you need to understand more of its history. In this instance, its history is intertwined with its people.

There's a place in town known as the John H. Johnson home and museum. Johnson was born in Arkansas City. He went on to become the founder of

Johnson Publishing Company which owned *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. Born of slaves, Johnson persevered. His toughness helped him succeed beyond most all others.

Also from Arkansas City, and full of determination and perseverance, is Robert S. Moore, Jr. The son of longtime Desha County Sheriff Robert S. Moore and a legendary mother, Dorothy Price Moore, Moore has led the charge to re-ignite Arkansas City for decades.

Moore is a former Arkansas Speaker of the House; he currently serves as chairman of the Arkansas Highway Commission and was appointed by Governor Asa Hutchinson to the Governor's Advisory Council on cycling.

If Arkansas City's eventual re-birth is even partially dependent on Moore Jr.'s drive, the town is a "can't miss."

It will rise again; let's see it for what it's worth. Arkansas City will never be a booming metropolis. It will never bring that big city feel. That's O.K. That simply will not stop it from persevering, just like its residents.

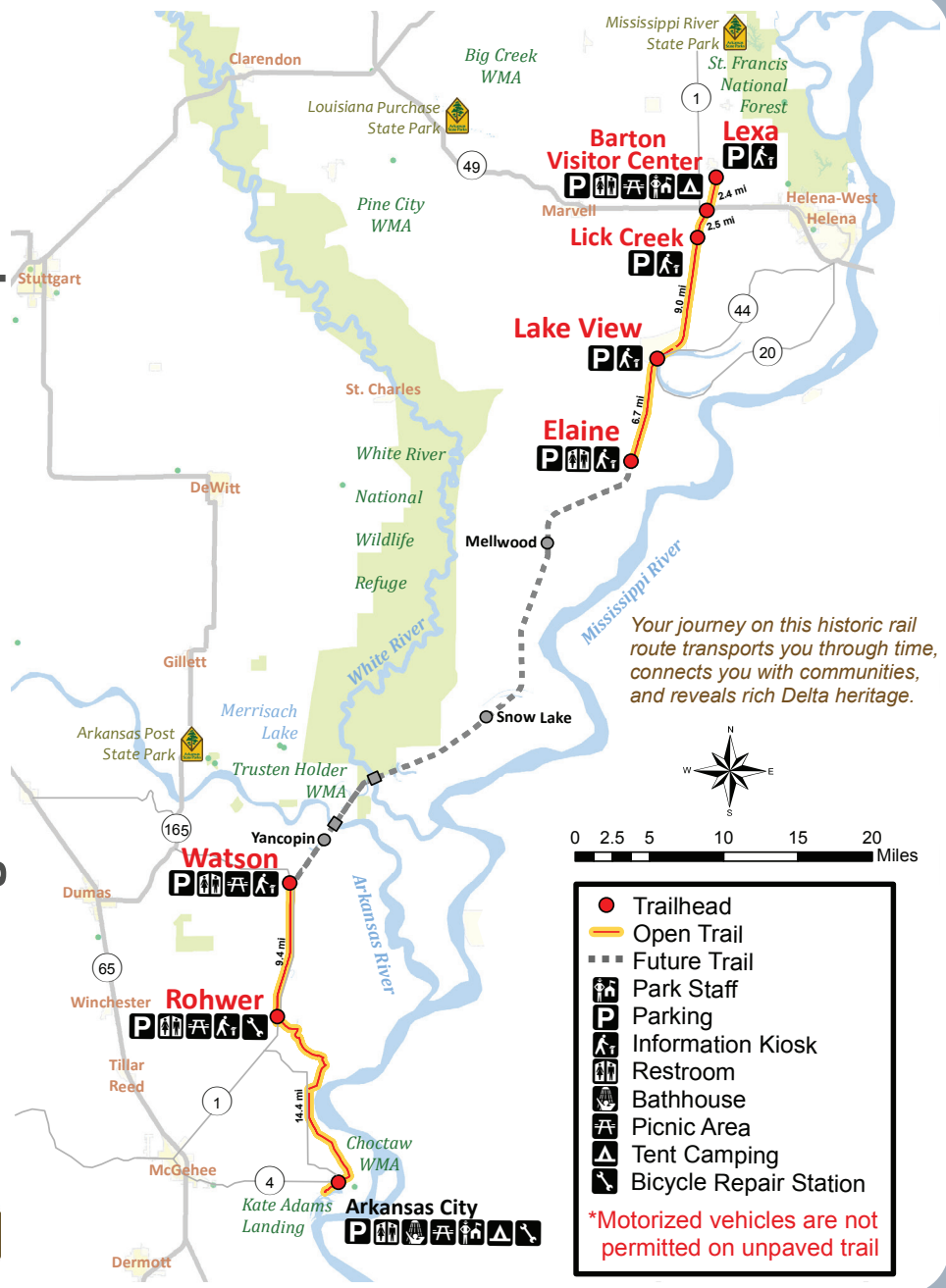
There is much in Arkansas City to build on. The history. The location. The beauty. While Arkansas City is still the county seat of Desha County, it wants to offer more and to be more.

It would be easy to ask, "What if?" What if the Great Flood had never happened? Would Arkansas City rival other major cities? Possibly.

Knowing history can't be erased, Arkansas City got off its back, stood up and is ready to grow—Visit and see. Ride the bike trail along the levee. See Kate Adams Lake. Embrace the town. Meet the people. Watch Arkansas City take off.



# Delta Heritage Trail State Park - Completed Trail



# Arkansas Democrat Gazette

Sunday, February 16, 2020

## Memphis to Arkansas City

By Rex Nelson

Major investments have been rare in the Arkansas Delta in recent years. That's one reason the excitement was palpable on a Thursday morning late last month as Gov. Asa Hutchinson and others gathered alongside U.S. 49 near the Phillips County community of Barton. They were there to announce a \$20 million gift from the Walton Family Foundation of Bentonville.

That \$20 million will be matched (mostly with federal funds) by the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage & Tourism in order to complete the Delta Heritage Trail, an 84.5-mile biking and hiking route from Lexa in the north to Arkansas City in the south.

This \$40 million will allow the trail to be completed during the next five years. The most expensive parts will be retrofitting former railroad bridges over the lower White River at a secluded spot known as Benzal (which Arkansas writer Keith Sutton once described as a "shantyboat town") and over the lower Arkansas River at Yancopin.

One might assume that the wildest, most remote parts of the state are in the Ozarks and the Ouachitas. I contend they're here.

The majority of the Big Woods, the vast tract of bottomland forests that ran along both sides of the lower Mississippi River, was cleared decades ago for row-crop agriculture. The fact that this wilderness remains will make it an attraction for bikers and hikers from across the country.

Hutchinson estimated that a completed trail will result in a \$7 million infusion into the Delta economy each year and create up to 600 jobs. He said a completed trail also will bring new energy to the Delta.

"Hikers and bikers will see bottomland hardwood forests and views from the levee that we don't see from our cars," Hutchinson said. "This is a great project for Arkansas."

On the north end of the Delta Heritage Trail, a 20.6-mile section of compacted gravel has been completed between Lexa and Elaine. On the south end there's a 14.4 mile paved section atop the Mississippi River levee from Arkansas City to Rohwer, along with a 9.4-mile section of compacted gravel from Rohwer to Watson. The middle section is the most expensive and likely wouldn't have been completed for decades had it not been for the support of the Walton Family Foundation.

What wasn't publicized at last month's announcement was that this will open a biking and hiking route from downtown Memphis to Arkansas City. It could become an international attraction if properly publicized.

On a late October day in 2016, a similar group of dignitaries had gathered on the Harahan Bridge, which crosses the Mississippi River at Memphis. VIPs from Tennessee and Arkansas were there to celebrate the opening of the Big River Crossing, a pedestrian boardwalk that allows cyclists and walkers to cross the river.

The \$18 million boardwalk, the longest of its kind in the country, was funded by federal, state and local government grants along with private contributions. Cyclists and walkers share the bridge with Union Pacific freight trains.

The Harahan Bridge, completed in 1916, supplemented the Frisco Bridge, which had been completed across the Mississippi River in 1892.

Three railroad companies—Cotton Belt, Iron Mountain and Rock Island—built the Harahan Bridge as a joint project.

The 5,000-foot bridge had two railroad tracks in the middle with one-way wagonways bolted onto each side. It was named for James Harahan, a former president of Illinois Central Railroad who was killed in a train accident while the bridge was under construction.

The Memphis-Arkansas Memorial Bridge (now the Interstate 55 bridge) was completed for automobiles in 1949 with sidewalks and four lanes for traffic. The Harahan roadways were closed.

"Unless you've been a train conductor, it's a view that you've not seen of downtown Memphis since 1949," Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland said that day in 2016. "It's such a civic and cultural amenity for our residents. I think it will draw tourists from all over the world."

Suddenly, the Arkansas Delta was on the map in a nation that has a passion for cycling, walking and other forms of outdoor recreation.

The St. Francis Levee District, which manages levees from Mississippi County in the north to Lee County in the south, approved the development of a bike trail atop the Mississippi River levee from the Harahan Bridge's western terminus in West Memphis to Marianna. Before that, some were calling the Big River Crossing the "bridge to nowhere." When the agreement was signed with the levee district, Terry Eastin, the director of the Big River Strategic Initiative, said: "The bridge to nowhere is now the bridge to everywhere."

Charlie McVean of Memphis, founder of McVean Trading & Investments, drove the development of the Big River Crossing. He had begun manufacturing hybrid bicycles in 2009 and soon realized that the area had little infrastructure for cyclists. Steve Higginbotham of Marianna was the driving force in getting the 73 miles of levee from West Memphis to Marianna open.

Once cyclists reach Marianna, they can take Arkansas 44 to St. Francis National Forest, where additional paving of roads has been done. Cyclists exit the national forest at Helena and can then ride a few miles out U.S. 49 in order to connect with Delta Heritage Trail.

In an Arkansas Democrat-Gazette story on a bicycle trip from Memphis to Marianna, Bob Robinson wrote: "The Memphis bridge conversion developed scope-creep when McVean began to consider where people would ride once they crossed the river and reached the Arkansas shore. Not wanting it to be known as the bridge to nowhere, he gave this issue much consideration before arriving at the obvious solution: Create the Big River Trail, a bicycle or walking path on top of the Mississippi River levee, which stands just a short distance from the west access for the bridge and extends all the way to Marianna. Obtaining permission to allow bicycle and pedestrians on top of the levee was no easy task. Sections of the levee in the St. Francis Levee District had not been open to public use since 1893."

The levee district later had to fight lawsuits and disgruntled landowners who blocked the route at points with steel posts and wire. The levee district

used a \$100,000 state grant to install 49 special gates that could be aligned with cattle gates atop the levee. They're just wide enough for cyclists and pedestrians to pass through.

As my cycling friends like to say, mountain biking and road cycling are the new golf—activities that people are willing to spend a large amount of money on and travel to pursue.

Consider what Alabama—specifically the Retirement Systems of Alabama—did in creating the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, a collection of world-class golf courses, many of which have adjacent resort hotels. That effort put Alabama on the tourism map for thousands of wealthy Americans who never would have considered visiting the state otherwise. Arkansas wants to do that in the area of cycling.

Several years ago, the state entered into an agreement with the U.S. Forest Service to develop Mississippi River State Park in St. Francis National Forest. A visitors' center staffed by federal and state employees was constructed with interactive exhibits on the Mississippi River, Crowley's Ridge and the Delta.

A campground, day-use area and nature trail were developed at nearby Bear Creek Lake. The St. Francis is the only national forest that touches the Mississippi River, and development of this park guarantees a nice middle section of the route from Memphis to Arkansas City.





Sunday, October 26, 2003

## The Choctaw purchase

### Commission's \$4.5 million buy gives public sprawling place to hunt, fish

By Trey Reid

ARKANSAS CITY — Choctaw Island's wildlife aren't cooperating this particular morning.

No whitetails or wild turkeys wander into view as several employees and commissioners from the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission get their first peek at one of the state's newest wildlife management areas Wednesday morning.

"I keep expecting to see a deer any minute," AGFC Commissioner Brett Morgan of Little Rock said.

It's easy to understand those expectations. The new 9,000-acre public hunting area in Desha County looks like a wildlife paradise.

Forested bottomlands, large open fields and swampy wetlands cover the landscape along the banks of the Mississippi River just across the levee from Arkansas City. Three lakes on the property and the big river that washes its shores hold the potential for superb fishing.

It isn't difficult to figure out why the commission was so excited about acquiring the property two years ago.

Choctaw Island is about as good as it gets when it comes to public hunting land in Arkansas.

"It's a spectacular piece of property," said Robert Moore, who owns land adjacent to Choctaw Island. "There's oak, ash, persimmon, pecan and cottonwoods. It's got a lot of deer and turkey, and there's potential for everything over there."

For the first time, the general public will have hunting and fishing access to it.

Arkansas lands behind the Mississippi River levee largely have been the domain of timber companies and private hunting clubs, but that changed with the commission's 2001 purchase of Choctaw Island.

When the Game and Fish Commission bought the property from Price Services Inc. of Monticello for \$4.5 million in 2001, Choctaw Island became the commission's first land holding behind the Mississippi River levee. It also was the commission's largest land acquisition since passage of the one-eighth cent conservation sales tax in 1996.

It was a bargain, too. The appraised value of the land was about twice the amount the commission paid for it. About \$1.2 million in state funds were used for the purchase, with the balance coming from federal funds, including \$2.3 million in Pittman-Robertson funds administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a \$300,000 grant from the North American Wetland Conservation Act.

"We bought the property in 1993 as a recreational property investment," John Price of Price Services said at the time of the sale. "The public has been using the lakes [Kate Adams Lake and two smaller bodies of water called the Pothole lakes] for quite some time, and it just makes more sense that the commission take over ownership as a public-use area."

Dick Carmical of Price Services said: "It gives access to an area that the public can use without belonging to a very expensive hunting club."

The commission approved the purchase in September 2001 and then completed the transaction and took possession about two months later.

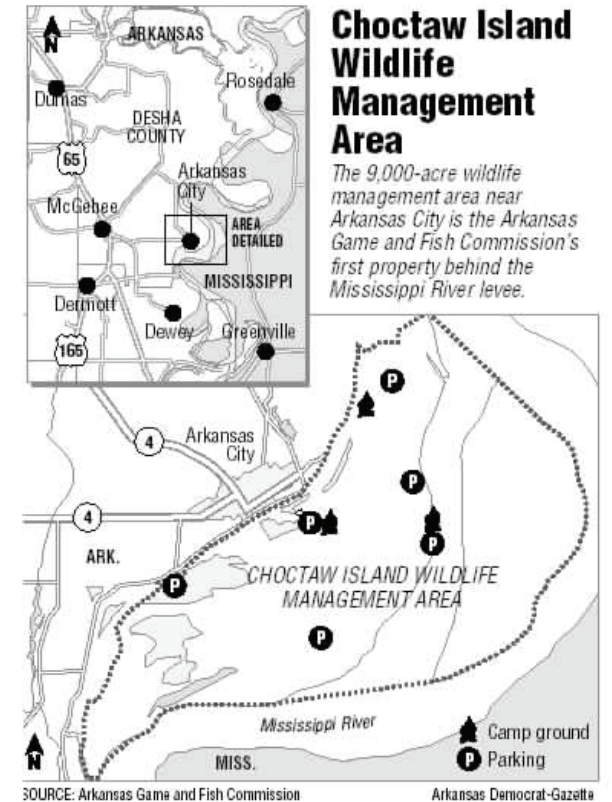
The area was closed to hunting during the 2001 season because of an existing hunting lease. In 2002, the commission opened the area to small-game hunting, and this year the commission is allowing permit deer hunting on the area for the first time.

Though there are many types of game roaming the wilds of Choctaw Island, the commission's most intensive management efforts for the area are centered on whitetailed deer.

The Game and Fish Commission describes white-tails as the "key management emphasis" for the Choctaw Island WMA, which is being managed to produce "quality" deer, which typically means large-antlered bucks and balanced buck-doe ratios.

So far, hunters haven't had any luck in the way of trophy bucks.

Hunters have killed 32 does through the early part of archery season and a threeday muzzleloading season earlier this month. No hunter has taken a buck. It's likely the result of strict antler standards being imposed on Choctaw Island.



A buck must have at least five antler points on one side of its rack in order to be legal. The statewide standard is three points on one side of the rack.

"We want to get away from the five-point rule," AGFC research biologist Mark Hooks told commissioners during a meeting Wednesday afternoon in Lake Village.

Hooks, who has been conducting extensive research on Choctaw Island's deer herd, said preliminary data shows that the five-point rule might not be as effective as other antler restrictions.



"We'd like to go with something like the width of the spread," he said. "One hunter said he saw an 8-point with a 20-inch spread, and he just waved at it and wiped a tear out of his eye because he couldn't shoot it."

Hooks' research has included the capture and tagging of nearly three dozen deer on the management area, which figures to help commission biologists get a better handle on the area's deer herd and effective ways to manage it.

The whitetail research on Choctaw Island also could lead to the area being designated a "deer research area," which Hooks proposed to the commission Wednesday.

The research appears to be off to a good start.

In addition to tagging 35 deer, commission biologists have worked with the University of Arkansas at Monticello to conduct population estimates using thermal-imaging technology, which revealed one deer per 7.4 acres in a sample area that included about 2,400 acres.

Biologists also have gathered data using motion-detection cameras set up throughout the area. Several thousand images have been collected through the photo study, showing a buck-doe ratio of about 1:1.5.

"I don't think that ratio is entirely accurate," Hooks said, cautioning. "We need to collect a lot more data in order to get a better idea of what it is."

Another research tool is a hunter survey, which is included along with a map on permits that are available at entrances to the area. Since Oct. 1, some 260 hunters have responded, Hooks said.

According to the survey, hunters have spent a total of 1,305 hours afield and have observed a total of 1,060 deer, which translates into hunters seeing an average of .81 deer per hour.

Survey responses reveal hunters observed 143 antlered bucks, 528 mature does and 368 fawns.

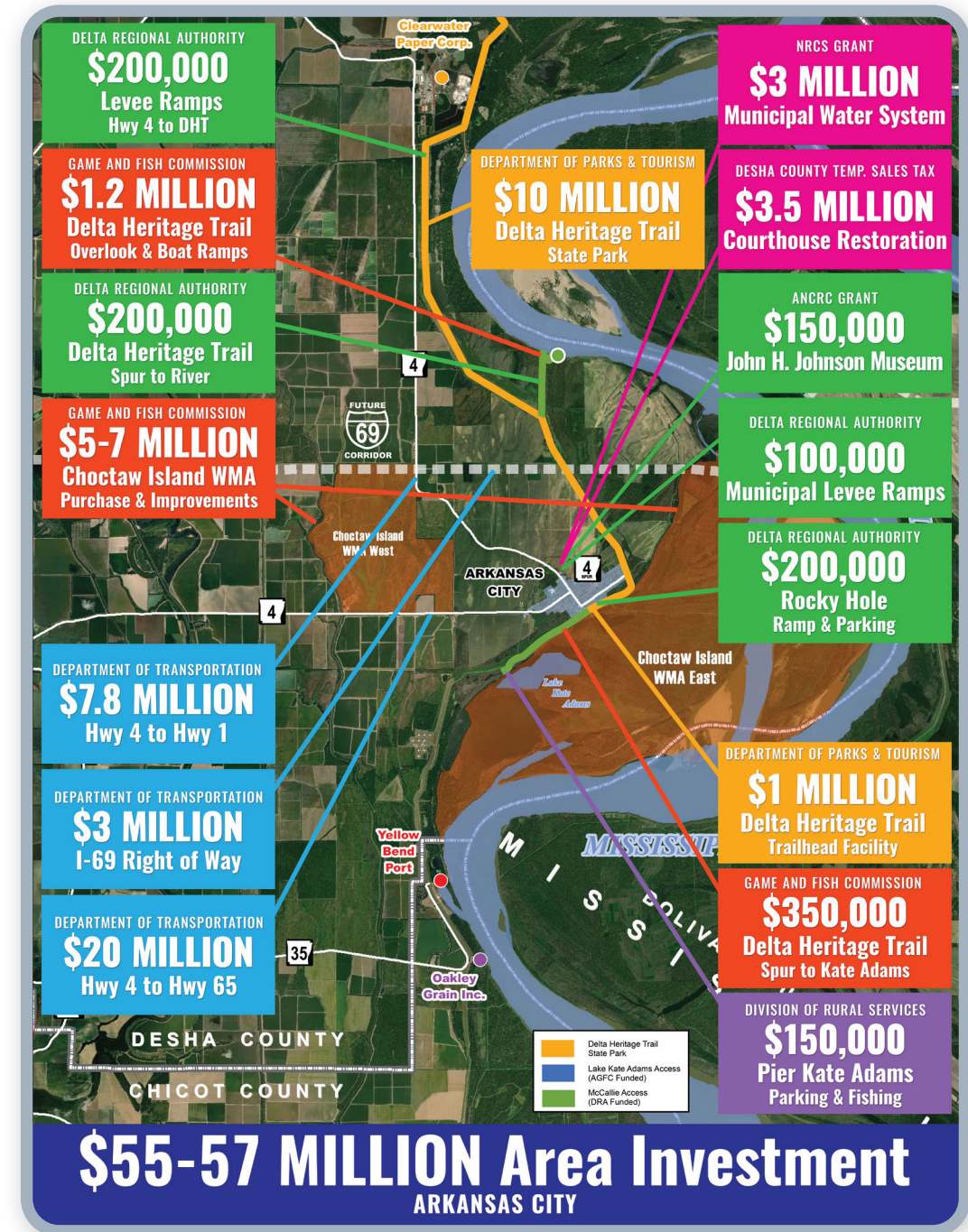
But hunters shouldn't assume that seeing and killing deer will come easy on Choctaw Island. Yes, the area is apparently teeming with whitetails and other wildlife, but hunting the new area poses new challenges to many hunters.

"We hunt the white oaks back home, and there aren't any white oaks here," said Bobby McGaha of Batesville, who was scouting the area Wednesday morning in advance of the modern-gun permit hunt on Nov. 1-3. "It's a whole new way of thinking."

With Choctaw Island now available, the state's sportsmen could also have a new way of thinking about public hunting and fishing in Arkansas.



Governor Mike Beebe and Robert S. Moore, Jr. at the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission dedication of the nature trails on the Choctaw Island Wildlife Management Area.





# Arkansas Democrat Gazette

Wednesday, February 19, 2020

## Oysters and optimism

By Rex Nelson

Optimism can be hard to find in the Arkansas Delta these days, but there was plenty to go around on the first Friday night of this month at the annual McGehee Men's Club oyster supper. It was the 26th year for the event, and a record crowd turned out to consume the 170 gallons of oysters (served both raw and fried) that members of the club brought back from Gulfport, Miss.

Almost 1,500 people from southeast Arkansas, west Mississippi and north Louisiana showed up and paid \$30 each for the meal and the fellowship. For a 10th consecutive year, the dinner was held in a former beer distributorship that the club has transformed into a community center. The money raised supports not only the community center but also the McGehee Boys & Girls Club and area baseball and softball programs.

"I sure hope we brought back enough oysters," said club president Johnny McGaha as he watched the line grow. "It would be terrible to have an oyster supper and run out of oysters."

For the record, there was enough food for everyone. While club members supplied the food, the optimism was supplied in part by the recent announcement that the Walton Family Foundation of Bentonville has committed \$20 million to complete the Delta Heritage Trail, an 84.5-mile hiking and biking route from Lexa to the nearby

Desha County seat of Arkansas City. The \$20 million foundation gift will be matched (mostly with federal funds) by the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage & Tourism. The \$40 million investment is expected to spur Delta tourism.

As one might guess, the two lead stories in the Feb. 5 edition of *The Times-News*, the weekly newspaper that covers McGehee and Dermott, were a preview of the oyster supper and an article on the \$20 million grant. But even longtime residents of this area might not realize how much already has been spent to set the stage for such tourism.

Robert Moore Jr., a former speaker of the Arkansas House of Representatives and now one of five members of the powerful Arkansas Highway Commission, has been relentless through the years in tapping every pot he can find for funds. His goal is to transform the area around the southern trailhead into an attraction not only for hikers and bikers but also for birdwatchers, heritage tourists, hunters and fishermen. Moore and other southeast Arkansas leaders have obtained:

\$20 million for improvements to Arkansas 4 from its intersection with U.S. 65 in McGehee to Arkansas City.

Another \$7.8 million for improvements to Arkansas 4 from Arkansas City to where it runs into Arkansas 1 south of Rohwer.

\$1 million from the state for restrooms and interpretive exhibits at the trailhead in Arkansas City.

\$150,000 from the Arkansas Rural Services Commission for parking and a fishing pier along Kate Adams Lake at Arkansas City.

\$500,000 from the Delta Regional Authority for access ramps to the Mississippi River levee and spur trails off the levee.

\$3 million for water-system improvements in Arkansas City.

\$3.5 million for restoration of the historic Desha County Courthouse at Arkansas City.

\$7 million for the purchase of and improvements to Choctaw Island by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

\$3 million from the Arkansas Department of Transportation for the purchase of right-of-way-property for future roads.

\$10 million already spent by the state on the Delta Heritage Trail.

\$1.2 million from the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission for an overlook and boat ramp on the Mississippi River north of Arkansas City.

That's about \$58 million in infrastructure. Add in the \$40 million that will be spent during the next five years to finish the Delta Heritage Trail, and the total reaches almost \$100 million in improvements to a part of the Delta where most Arkansans think nothing is happening. The thing that's needed now is private capital to complement the government and foundation funds.

Rick Hales, the mayor of tiny Arkansas City, is doing his part. Hales once helped operate the Delta Resort & Spa near McGehee for high-flying investor Gary Gibbs, whose real estate empire later collapsed. Gibbs defaulted on almost \$120 million in loans for Delta Resort and his Hotel Hot Springs & Spa.

Sensing the potential of the Delta Heritage Trail, Hales set his sights on Arkansas City. Across the street from the levee, Hales has opened the Furr House Bed & Breakfast. I've stayed in bed-and-breakfast inns across the South and can attest to the fact that this is among the nicer inns I've visited. The house was constructed in 1910 by timber baron Hubert Furr and his wife Ionia in the Dutch Colonial Revival style. It's the only residence in Arkansas City that features ornamental concrete blocks.

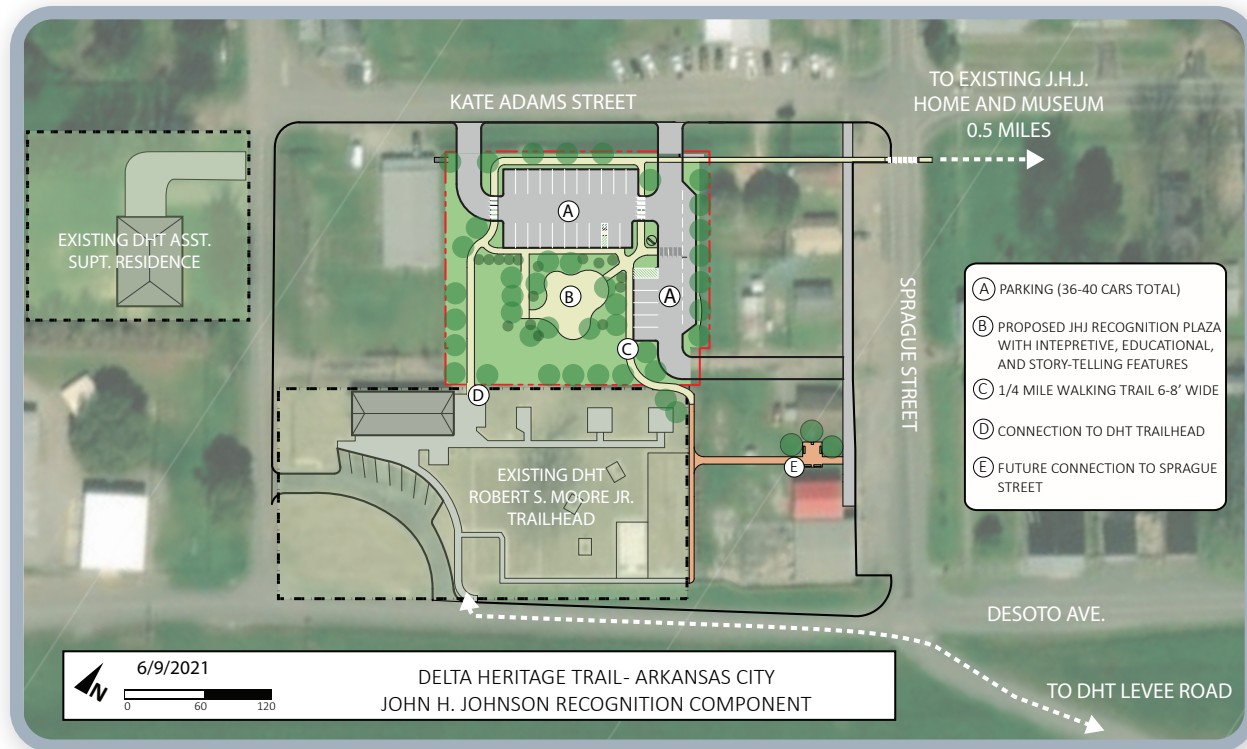
Hales has five bedrooms for rent. Moore, whose father was the longtime Desha County sheriff, hopes to convert his family home into another bed-and-breakfast inn that will offer five bedrooms. Meanwhile, Hales is looking for a

business partner to help convert an old commercial structure along the levee (and just steps from the trail-head) into a facility that will have a restaurant on one side, a coffee shop and bakery on the other side, and six overnight rooms upstairs. If this project and Moore's inn are completed, there will be 16 rooms in Arkansas City for overnight visitors.

Given the size of the Walton Family Foundation's investment in the Delta, I would think that Ropeswing Hospitality Group, a company created by Walton family members, might have an interest in partnering with Hales.







ABOVE: Site plan for the future John H. Johnson Memorial Park funded by a grant partnership between the Walton Family Foundation and Arkansas Parks and Tourism. BELOW: Left, Restored childhood home of Arkansas City native, John H. Johnson; Right, John H. Johnson and Robert S. Moore, Jr. met in Chicago in the mid-1990s to discuss future plans for an Arkansas City tribute to Mr. Johnson.



## Arkansas City is home to eight sites on the National Register of Historic Places

**Arkansas City Commercial Historic District**  
DeSoto Ave. & Sprague St.

**Arkansas City High School**  
Robert S. Moore Ave. & President St.

**Desha County Courthouse**  
(pictured)  
Robert S. Moore Ave.

**Dickinson-Moore House**  
707 Robert S. Moore Avenue

**Hubert & Ionia Furr House**  
702 Desoto Avenue

**Mound Cemetery**  
.5 mile North of Arkansas City on County Road 351

**Thane House**  
Levy & 1st Streets

**Xenophon Overton Pindall Law Office**  
Capitol & Kate Adams Streets



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