Growing Pains

Neighborhood fabric of Spanish Town parade bursting at the seams

By DERRICK NUNNALLY

After Saturday, the 22-year-old Spanish Town Mardi Gras parade may never roll on Spanish Town Road again, having outgrown the neighborhood that spawned it.

Moving the route is not likely to be popular with some neighborhood residents, but it is being called necessary.

“There’s just too many people down there to continue with this on Spanish Town Road,” said Bruce Childers, a board member for the Society for the Preservation of Lagniappe in Louisiana, which orchestrates the event. “We’re going to have to move it off Spanish Town, no doubt.”

The parade is an exercise in winking, self-conscious bad and boozy taste that extends to the kitschy pink flamingo that is the parade’s — and the neighborhood’s — symbol. Float themes run the intentionally outrageous gamut from risqué to disgusting, a concept embraced by the crowds who flock to the parade.

Talk of the parade being moved surprised some residents — many of whom throw open their doors to offer food and drink to all comers.

“How can you have a Spanish Town parade that doesn’t go through Spanish Town?” Andy Kopplin asked.

Organizers say the parade is an immense draw and is adding more events nearly every year. This year, in addition to the Mardi Gras Mambo, a four-year-old morning 10K race, there’ll be...
parade-centric festival and a larger parade than ever before.

The "Mardi Gras on the River" — seating, a food court, live music, even public-address announcements of floats and times — will be on the downtown stretch of the route that is the farthest away from Spanish Town.

The Police Department also wanted an upgrade to the usual float limit, giving this year's parade permission for up to 125 ats. As of Wednesday, 88 were on the official Web site, www.frflamingo.org.

Add that to the event that drew 0,000 people last year, and riders' statement that the parade has become too much for tiny Spanish Town Road gains weight.

"It's growing every year," Downtown Development District Director Dave Rhorer said. "If you move it out of Spanish Town, it would lose a bit of its flavor."

The story goes that Spanish Town ontogenetically generated its parade as a reaction to a lack of Mardi Gras festivities in town. Residents wandered the streets, in outlandish get-ups, drinks in hand.

The marching bands, floats, and organization came over the years, did the people thronging along the Spanish Town Road-and-down streets parade route. The event became one of few big draws in Baton Rouge can boast of, save college sports.

This year, the parade turns the corner away from being a neighborhood event, in part because the city is otherwise starved for a signature springtime tradition.

Bonne Fête, an annual concert has, intended as the city's biggest regional attraction, is on hiatus after two straight years of disappointing revenues. The next-largest downtown draws are Earth Day, the Fourth of July and Christmas lights on North Boulevard — all popular events, but local in touches.

The Spanish Town parade, by contrast, is the big daytime event in south central Louisiana on the Saturday before Mardi Gras, as well as the designated time for the business-as-usual-on-Fat-Tuesday capital city to cut loose. Naturally, the people came.

"Our long-term goal is to make Baton Rouge more of a destination location for family Mardi Gras people through the tradition of the parade," said Tracy McKee, who is organizing the festival.

The Spanish Town Mardi Gras parade, she says, has generated a popularity that makes it viable as the cornerstone of an all-day festival.

To build up to the next level, she said, requires more planning than just parade organization.

"The parade grew kind of like a wild tree or shrub with no one there pruning it as it expanded and expanded," said McKee, an event planner. "You reach a point where it's no longer a community parade, and you need someone to help manage it."

The boost in floats is supposed to be a one-time thing, Childers explained. Its aim is to introduce floatbuilding krewes to the thrill of rolling on the city's big parade day, maybe, he hopes, stirring enough interest for a follow-up parade or a weekend-long festival.

"Right now, when the parade is over, everybody hangs out in uptown if they've got friends there, then they go home," Childers said. "Somewhere down the road, we'd like to put on a free concert and maybe a night parade by building on the popularity. It's pretty ambitious."

"The prospect of such growth comes with the fear that it will cost the Spanish Town parade its risqué flavor. The contention that the parade must be moved because it's growing doesn't dovetail well with the idea of adding more activities to make the event more universally acceptable, some residents say.

"It looks like they're going to gentrify this thing until it's politically correct," said Doc L'Herrison, a longtime parade participant who lives in Spanish Town and is now working with the Society for Preservation of Lagniappe in Louisiana.

Childers said he doesn't foresee a day when floats content is censored. He added that the parade would almost certainly always remain downtown.

McKee and Rhorer each added that they're well aware of Spanish Town's protective attitude toward its Mardi Gras parade, and each refused to comment on whether the parade would be moved next year, or where it would go. North Street, which borders on Spanish Town, has been mentioned as an alternate route.