‘Calm’ traffic, analyst says
BR told wider roads not necessary

By TOM GUARISCO
Advocate business writer

Baton Rouge should accept its traffic congestion instead of widening highways to cure it, an Orlando traffic consultant said in a lecture Wednesday night.

The cost of coping with congestion by managing it, rather than rerouting cars and paving new roads, will pay off in the long term, traffic engineer Walter Kulash told a gathering of about 100 local residents and government officials.

Kulash is a consultant working on a new master plan for downtown. He specializes in redesigning streets as a way to both manage traffic and revitalize neighborhoods.

By making streets "calmer" — either by narrowing them or encouraging drivers to slow down — communities around such congested areas end up thriving, Kulash said.

"It leads to community reinvestment," Kulash said.

The approach is radically different from what traffic engineers have preached for decades. Another new idea: the best speed to move traffic efficiently is 30 to 35 mph.

When cars go faster they tend to spread out and don't move as efficiently. When cars are slowed down, roads become more efficient.

Kulash said traffic engineers are beginning to realize that widening highways and raising speed limits do not cure congestion. Instead, such measures weaken communities by making residents more dependent on cars to get to work or to shops.

"Laying asphalt is all we did for the longest time. It was a strong mandate," Kulash said. "The mandate is dissolving."

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Traffic

Kulash is part of a team of consultants working on the $450,000 contract to create a new plan to revitalize downtown and make it more pedestrian-friendly. The Miami planning firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk hired Kulash and a few other specialists to create the plan.

Kulash has created an alternative transportation plan for Boone, N.C., has studied the use of light rail to replace car commuting in Central Florida and has worked on similar traditional plans in 10 U.S. cities.

After a two-day cursory inspection of downtown Baton Rouge, Kulash said he sees significant assets that will make revitalizing downtown easier. They include the nearby residential neighborhoods of Spanish and Beuregard Towns, a growing downtown work force and the river front.

The problem here seems to be pessimism, Kulash said.

"It's more a lack of confidence that these things can happen," he said. "We see places much worse off than you are but they think it can happen."

Metro Councilman Pat Culbertson said after the lecture that the new approach to curing congestion is worth looking at, but said he doubts all of Kulash's ideas would work in all places in Baton Rouge.

"We would be foolish not to listen," Culbertson said. "The concept of traffic calming is one I'll have to think about. ... I can see it making sense, but we wouldn't want to apply it universally."

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