BR economy seeking new directions

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The year 1982 will go into the record books as the one that brought to the Baton Rouge area economic scene a search for new directions.

The "tripod" underpinnings of the area economy — industry, state and local government, and two major universities — were set askew as the national slowdown in demand for basic products of the petrochemical industrial corridor began to be felt.

The slackened demand for chemicals for the making of products ranging from auto components to tires, from roofing to consumer product packaging, first brought reduced manufacturing output, then layoffs and finally even some plant closures.

The economic punch was one that would have sent reeling many sections of the country more dependent on a single economic base. And while it only stunned the Baton Rouge area, still the lurch was severe enough to cause area leaders to begin seeking a defense against any future threat to the economy.

No matter that the state and local governments, with their combined payroll of more than 52,000 people, and the two universities were and would likely remain viable bases for at least a degree of economic stability: The strong sense of security that had pervaded the area suddenly was gone.

Suddenly, there were predictions that the hum of the petrochemical corridor would be silent within the decade. Some noted that the prime water frontage property along the Mississippi River already had been claimed for development. And serious attention was paid to the declining major revenue base of the state government — levies from oil and natural gas production.

These developments brought a degree of urgency to an old economic theme that had been muted by the cymbals of success over the years — the need for diversification.

High technology industries, which develop the products of the future, were seized upon by some as being an ideal new base — employee-oriented, medium to high wages, low pollution, and not space hungry.

Meanwhile, the Legislature heard from two consultants that the state's present plans for boosting the Louisiana economy are short-sighted, underfunded and misdirected. They said the need is not so much to attract new industries from outside the state with tax breaks and other incentives, but to help in the expansion of those already here and to encourage the start of new businesses in the state.

In a satellite move, the Legislature in special session approved measures designed to decrease the cost of worker's compensation insurance to business and industry, freeing capital to meet other obligations or objectives.

While the outcome of any thrusts for new

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