Welcome, ya'll, to Baton Rouge

By JULIE KAY
Special to The Advocate

There are a few things you need to know if you're new to Baton Rouge. In a nutshell, summers are hot and humid and we have our fair share of traffic woes, but it's hard to beat the rich heritage of our city and the friendly folks you'll meet.

Baton Rouge is not only the state's capital, but a veritable gold mine of historic opportunities, many of them anchored near the Mighty Mississippi.

Take some time to explore the culture and cuisine.

The city became the state capital in 1845 and is located in East Baton Rouge Parish.

We don't have counties here in Louisiana; we have parishes. It's just one of many things unique about our state.

You may soon realize that in Louisiana, a name isn't necessarily what it appears.

Richard isn't usually Richard but "Ree-shard," and Hebert may be "A-Bear."

That's enough to get you started.

Check with a native and you'll catch on soon enough.

In the meantime, hop in the car and take a tour. If you're starting in Baton Rouge, it won't be hard to find a special interest. The military history buff in your family might like to visit the USS Kidd, a World War II destroyer, available for tours.

Located in downtown Baton Rouge next to Riverfront Plaza, it's within easy walking distance of both the Center of Political and Governmental History (the old State Capitol) and the Louisiana Arts and Science Center Riverside Museum.

Bring a picnic lunch and relax on the levee while you watch the barges move up and down the Mississippi River.

If you like games of chance, you'll notice two riverfront casinos along the Mississippi — The Belle of Baton Rouge and Casino Rouge.

Continue your tour at the State Capitol.

You can't miss it. It's a 34-story building in the heart of downtown. Legend goes that one of Louisiana's more colorful governors, Huey P. Long, ordered 50 extra feet added to the structure so it wouldn't be the nation's tallest capital.

Guided tours are available at the Capitol. From the 27th floor's observation deck, you will have a clear view of much of the city. Nearby are the Pentagon Barracks, built between 1823 and 1924 to house U.S. Army personnel.

There's much more to downtown, but there are also more to the city you might now be calling home.

If you have shoppers in the family, you're in luck. Baton Rouge is just a short drive away from the Mall of Louisiana, located just off I-10 on Bluebonnet Boulevard.

The Mall at Cortana may be accessed from either Airport Highway or Florida Boulevard. It has been a fixture in the city for over 20 years. Both malls have a wide array of shops sure to please the most discriminating shopper.

But not to leave out the charm and unique assortment offered at every turn from other local merchants, there are also a number of smaller stores reflecting the local flavor.

It won't be too hard to sample the local cuisine here.

Ask anyone.

If Baton Rougeans had to pick only one thing we do well here, many of them would say "eat."

There isn't any shortage of restaurants, and The Advocate publishes a restaurant guide every Friday in the FUN Section.

There's an old saying that Louisianians will eat anything that doesn't eat them first. That may be a slight exaggeration, but we do enjoy our food here, and we like to brag about it as well.

Generally, the two most well-known cuisines are Creole and Cajun.

If you're into the arts, we've got the Baton Rouge Little Theatre, the Baton Rouge Symphony, a number of plays from Southern University or Louisiana State University, or the Riverside Center and its Theater for the Performing Arts.

Since we are home to two major universities, Southern and LSU, there are a wealth of educational opportunities.

The improved Baton Rouge riverfront will soon have crowds of people celebrating the Fourth of July in a "Star Spangled Celebration."

For the sports enthusiast, there's also a talent pool that's hard to beat when it comes to basketball, baseball and football, just to name a few.

While we're on sports, Baton Rouge lays claim to its own professional soccer team, the Bombers, that stirs up action from May through August.

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Downtown BR remains a work in progress

By JULIE KAY
Special to The Advocate

Revitalizing the downtown area has been on the drawing boards and in the dreams of many Baton Rougeans who want to make it a 24-hour-a-day mecca for recreation and business.

The revitalization has been in the works for 11 years, according to Davis Rhorer, director of the Downtown Development District.

There has already been some $370 million in development provided by public and private sectors, and another $180 million on the drawing board, he said.

The decline of downtown began in the early '60s as life migrated into the suburbs. In the mid-'80s, the effort to do something about it began, said Rhorer.

Since 1987, completed projects include the Baton Rouge Landing or city dock, now utilized by The American Queen, Delta Queen and Mississippi Queen riverboat vessels. Paving, lighting, and seating are among some of the riverfront improvements that have been completed.

The Old State Capitol renovation has been completed. It is now the Center for Political and Governmental History. The redevelopment of Catfish Town and the USS Kidd Naval Museum have also added to the list of downtown attractions.

Just a few of the latest planning goals include developing the Mississippi Riverfront for major open space recreation, consolidating government and office space, encouraging residential development, promoting cultural activities and attractions, establishing Fourth Street as the city's premier business address, and enhancing visual character, along with providing an increased sense of security and safety.

There is talk, depending on funding granted, of expanding the Riverside Centreplex, construction of a new performing arts theater, a planetarium, and a visitors center and museum near the State Capitol.

Bringing the downtown area back to life benefits the entire community, Rhorer said.

Leon Maisel, director of the Baton Rouge Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, agrees.

"Downtown helps attract conventions to cities. A dynamic downtown does help sell those conventions, and with it comes economic development. Downtown is our calling card and the Mississippi River is an added attraction."

Tourists often comment on the charm and character of downtown Baton Rouge, Maisel said.

As more nightclubs, shops and entertainment comes to the area, it will become a conduit for more and more development, he said.

Just the fact that Baton Rouge is a Mississippi River town draws in some people just want to see the river itself, he said. "When they get here, they'll say, 'Wow, we didn't know Louisiana was so pretty."

Rhorer said he's excited that so much has already been accomplished in the downtown area.

"What I'm so pleased with is that the things we've laid down are happening. Where there used to be a high rate of vacancy, we now have some 30 restaurants downtown and in the neighborhood of 30 public events, plus there's a Farmer's Market each Saturday to directly sell some of the area's freshest products to people."

Improvements and renovations to downtown's Spanish Town and Beaufort Town have also heightened awareness of residential life in the area.

In addition, a new master plan for downtown will be formulated during public planning sessions this summer. The final plan is expected to take six months.

Rhorer said the "new urbanism" concept will revisit zoning and planning codes to see if more development can be encouraged.

Consultants are working on a new plan for downtown Baton Rouge that will utilize ideas tested in other cities across the country.

After public input, a master plan will be presented to the Baton Rouge Area Foundation and then to the city's Metro Council.

It's an exciting time for downtown, said Rhorer.

Those new to Baton Rouge should "take a drive through the quaint streets," he said.

"They're gems. We were born on the river, we go back to the river and there are so many historic attractions."

Welcome

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

If your family includes toddlers, teenagers or senior citizens, look for opportunities afforded them by the East Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission (BREC). You'll see those initials on many of the area golf courses, parks and short courses offered throughout the city.

Seniors might check out some of the support groups and classes offered through the Council on Aging, and all ages may wish to visit any of the area's conveniently located library branches.

Looking for a place the family can spend the day?

Try the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo in Baker, a short drive from Baton Rouge. It's a popular attraction even on the hottest of days, and with a petting zoo and wide assortment of unique animals, children and adults enjoy the action close-up.

There's much more to Baton Rouge, and you'll discover it for yourself the longer you're here.

Let us be the first to welcome you!
School buildings are old, need major repairs

Advocate staff report

The East Baton Rouge Parish public school system, one of the largest in the country, needs an overhaul of its buildings.

To pay for that and other improvements and to raise salaries, School Board committees have suggested a sales tax election Nov. 3.

Superintendent Gary Mathews' plan would use a 1-cent sales tax levied for 5½ years and $1.7 million from the school system general fund to raise a total of $296 million.

His proposal includes about $84 million for school repairs, $13.3 million to add enough classrooms to replace temporary buildings and $47 million to replace two schools. It also includes annual costs of $15.9 million for employee raises, $2.4 million for discipline programs and $2.5 million to add three training days for teachers.

But school system officials acknowledge they face an uphill battle persuading a reluctant public to vote for new school taxes.

Voters in November trounced the board's first effort to raise money to overhaul the entire system — not just buildings. In that election, the school system sought approval for two taxes that would have generated more than $3 billion over 35 years.

Parish voters haven't approved a facilities tax for the school system since 1969, the year man first walked on the moon.

Mathews said recently that the latest plan is a "leaner, meaner" one than the proposal defeated in November. He said it is based on the School Board's instructions to design a program that would accomplish important goals at the "bare minimum" cost.

Trying to improve deteriorating buildings is not the school system's only struggle. The system also is the defendant in one of the oldest school desegregation cases in the country.

The system has been under federal court order to desegregate since 1960. That first order included no timetable for integration.

In 1980, U.S. District Judge John Parker found the system hadn't done enough. He said it had continued to build black schools for black students and white schools for white students.

In 1981, Parker implemented a busing plan that remained in place until he approved the latest desegregation plan in August 1996.

With the latest plan, the 12-member School Board and Mathews, who is entering his fourth year here, are trying to make up for that history.

The plan is the first in the country in which a school system, the NAACP and the U.S. Department of Justice agreed to rely on voluntary desegregation.

The plan scrapped cross-town busing in favor of letting children go to their community schools. It aims to desegregate by allowing students to transfer to schools outside their attendance zones.

There are two ways they can do that:

• Majority to minority — or M-to-M — transfers let students attend a school if their move furthers desegregation. They can move from a school where they are in the majority race to one where they are in the minority.

• Magnet programs offer students special instruction as an incentive for attending a school outside their zone. The magnets aim to attract white students into mostly black, inner-city schools.

Only a few magnets were implemented in the first year of the plan — 1996-97 — and attendance zones changed only at the elementary level.

School administrators attributed the 11th-hour approval of the plan and the confusion it caused among parents to a sharp drop in enrollment of 1,833 students. Their parents opted to enroll them in private or parochial schools instead.

Middle and high school parents, teachers and students had a year to prepare for the changes in their attendance zones, which took effect in fall 1997. Enrollment dropped just 316 students last year to 56,436.

The system also is continuing to add more magnet programs under the desegregation plan last year in areas like computers and technology, foreign languages, the performing arts, academics, multi-

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Other magnets are the system's gifted and scholastic academies, which aim to attract white students to mostly black schools and also to include more black students in those programs. Black students historically have been underrepresented in gifted and talented classes.

One of the desegregation plan's goals is to decrease the number of one-race schools by 14 by the end of the 1998-99 school year. It had 68 such schools in the 1995-96 school year and 62 last year.

The plan also tries to make up for years of neglecting the system's inner-city, mostly black schools by giving them extra money and a few more employees. It also dedicated some money to repairing those schools.

Even though the school system, the NAACP and the Justice Department agreed to the desegregation plan, the School Board and its 99 schools still are under federal court control.

The earliest the system can ask for freedom from court control — and then only with the plaintiffs' blessing — is the fifth year of the plan. The earliest it can ask for that freedom by itself is in the eighth year.

Other issues the School Board is working on are a technology plan and a way to raise salaries of school employees and teachers, who are some of the lowest paid in the country. Both elements are part of the tax proposal the school system is developing.

For more information about the school system, including attendance zones and magnet programs, call the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board at 922-5400 or visit the office at 1050 S. Foster Drive.

19,829 attend non-public schools

About one-quarter of the parish's students in kindergarten through grade 12 attend private or parochial schools, according to the State Department of Education.

In all, 19,829 students attended non-public schools in East Baton Rouge Parish during the 1997-98 school year, according to the education department's school directory.

According to the directory, 10,720 students were enrolled in the parish's 18 Catholic schools, and 9,109 students attended the other non-public schools in the parish. The 51 non-public schools employed 1,486 teachers.

For more information about the parish's parochial schools, contact the Baton Rouge Diocese, which serves area surrounding parishes, at 336-8735.

Private schools can be found in the phone book, or on the world wide web at the state Department of Education's web site: http://www.doe.state.la.us.
Area colleges provide education opportunities

LSU, Southern, USL and SLU offer varied degree programs

Capitol news bureau

The Baton Rouge area is served by four public universities: Louisiana's "flagship" university, LSU; one of the nation's largest mostly-black campuses, Southern University; and two growing regional centers of higher education, the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette and Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond.

State officials also are starting a community college in Baton Rouge. The planned Baton Rouge Community College is scheduled to open in this fall in the Rebel Shopping Center near Florida Boulevard and Foster Drive.

Eventually, the Baton Rouge Community College is slated to expand into the adjacent 30-plus acres occupied by State Police headquarters and the Office of Motor Vehicles on South Foster Drive.

Baton Rouge is also home to Our Lady of the Lake College, established in 1990.

With nearly 1,000 students, Our Lady of the Lake College offers freshman, sophomore and selected upper division liberal arts and science courses and associate and bachelors degrees in nursing, the health sciences and in general studies.

The college awards the bachelor of science degree in nursing, and associate of science degrees in nursing, radiologic technology, surgical technology, emergency health science, physical therapy assisting and medical laboratory technology and general studies.

Most state universities — not LSU — have open admissions, meaning they accept any Louisiana resident with a high school diploma.

Southern University is set to adopt admission standards beginning in 2000, but the state has indicated it might want to delay that by a year.

LSU generally enrolls freshmen who earned at least average grades on a specific college preparatory curriculum in high school or who otherwise prove they are ready for college courses.

LSU is considering raising its admission requirements somewhat.

LSU's main campus in Baton Rouge is by far the state's largest university.

Enrollment once exceeded 30,000, but declined during the hard economic times of the 1980s.

However, LSU's 1997-98 student headcount totalled 28,158, and is expected to top 30,000 again in the next few years.

LSU offers a broad spectrum of education across sciences, engineering, business, music, design, education, agriculture and veterinary medicine.

LSU is proud of its engineering college and boasts one of the top five petroleum engineering programs in the nation, according to a national magazine.

LSU is a federal land grant and sea grant college, and conducts extensive research in agriculture and water-related fields.

For example, one LSU researcher developed microbes that "eat" oil, a technology used to fight oil spills.

For the 1997-98 school year, undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees at LSU total $2,711 per year for full-time, in-state students, and $6,311 per year for out-of-state students.

Southern University is the center of the Southern University system, which includes three campuses and a law school.

The student headcount at Southern was 10,217 last fall.

In addition to a wide range of bachelor's and master's degrees, historically black university also offers a doctoral degree in special education. It also has a nursing school, a jazz studies program and other specialized programs.

Undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees at Southern University total $2,068 per year for in-state students and $5,852 per year for non-residents.

The University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette has a growing academic and research reputation.

Offering a variety of bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees, USL recorded a student headcount of 17,044 last fall.

For the 1997-98 school year, undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees at SLU total $1,898 per year for Louisiana residents and $6,553 for non-residents.

LSU is especially proud of its computer science program, which offered the first doctorate in the state in this increasingly important field. USL also is known for its engineering program, which features a computer-aided manufacturing program.

Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, 40 miles east of Baton Rouge, is the fastest growing four-year campus in Louisiana, with more students from Baton Rouge than anywhere else.

SLU, with a student headcount of 15,330, is largely a liberal arts commuter school.

Currently, undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees total $1,930 a year for in-state students and $5,194 for non-residents.

Originally projected to open with about 700 students, the Baton Rouge Community College could end up with more than 1,200 students when it opens in August.

The school is being created to fulfill a provision of a settlement agreement in a long running higher education desegregation lawsuit.

The community college is working on several courses and degree programs.

However, BRCC officials are especially proud of programs aimed at training students for work in the area petrochemical industry.

Tuition fees at the community college are half the cost of going to LSU or Southern University. Tuition and required fees for a full-time student at BRCC are $1,056 for in-state students and $3,624 for out-of-state students.
BREC has something for everyone in BR

By CHANTE DIONNE WARREN
Advocate staff writer

Parkgoers in East Baton Rouge Parish this year can stroll through a cypress swamp, view the stars from an observatory or study an aquarium filled with Louisiana fish.

The Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission's network of parks, camps, and outdoor and indoor recreation opportunities has only continued to grow, said BREC Superintendent Eugene A. Young.

"Programs are still going as strong as in the past," Young said.

Among the highlights are: The Bluebonnet Swamp Nature Center, a 101 acre park in the cypress-tupelo swamp off Bluebonnet Boulevard; Highland Road Astronomical Observatory, featuring a state-of-the-art telescope and special Friday night star-gazing programs; and the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo's new Louisiana Exhibit slated to open this fall, featuring an aquarium of native salt- and fresh-water fish.

BREC now has 177 parks and a variety of programs and activities to interest visitors.

Day care for children are offered at many recreation centers. Along with the basic summer day camps is the Magnolia Mound History Camp and a Zoo Summer Day Camp.

Again this year, BREC will feature the Bluebonnet Swamp's Wet and Wild Project camp for children ages 12 to 14, and the Swamp Stompers program for children ages 7 to 11. Those camps will be offered for three one-week sessions.

Wet and Wild offers exploration of the Bluebonnet swamps, viewing microscopic organisms, learning about various plant varieties and building birdhouses. Swamp Stompers will feature swamp exploration, bug collecting, T-shirt and field trips.

Star Gazers, a two-week camp for children ages 12 to 14, features astronomy projects and field trips. Hello Picasso, a camp for aspiring artists, will be offered for teens and younger children at City Park.

One of the more popular programs is the Summerstock Theatre Mini Camp, which BREC and Playmakers of Baton Rouge are offering for junior actors.

The camp lasts six half days and is offered for children ages 6 to 9 and 10 to 13, for two morning and afternoon, two-week sessions.

Children work on a production to be performed for parents at the end of the program.

BREC also offers sports for children and adults, including softball and baseball leagues, in-line skating and volleyball.

The organization maintains dozens of lighted and unlighted tennis courts, sprawl around the parish.

Many of the tennis courts are free, but some BREC Tennis Centers charge a small fee. There is also an indoor court at the Independence Center at Government Street and Lobdell Avenue.

BREC has six golf courses in the parish, including the state-of-the-art Santa Maria course designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. Green fees are.

Recreation centers throughout the BREC system offer classes in swimming, tennis, golf, aerobics, weight lifting, football and cheerleading.

Neighborhood centers opened last year at Saia Park in Melrose East and T.D. Bickham Park in Baker.

BREC has a variety of other attractions, including Magnolia Mound Plantation Home, the L.H. Cohn Arboretum and the Baton Rouge Art Gallery, which features the work of local artists, poets, musicians and other performing arts.

Magnolia Mound Plantation Home is the oldest plantation home in the area.

BREC also offers activities for senior citizens, including arts and crafts, ballroom dancing, bingo, holiday and birthday parties, bridge, cakewalks, ceramics, exercise classes, flower arranging, libraries, line dancing, quilting, crocheting and more.

For people wanting something for the whole family, camping, bike trails, fishing, picnicking areas, and horseback riding are available.

Each summer, BREC offers supervised outdoor programs at about 50 playgrounds throughout the parish.

Activities offered for free include softball, ping pong, horse shoes, trips to the zoo, track, basketball, golf, Frisbee and more.

Other special activities include the ultimate Frisbee contest, the BMX National, the Baton Rouge Junior Golf program, and the Regional Radio Controlled Car Championships. BREC also offers archery, in-line skating, tennis, horseback riding and even unicycling. It also has seven swimming pools and velodrome cycling.

But one of the most popular family activities remains BREC's Greater Baton Rouge Zoo, which features more than 1,000 animals on its 145 acres.

In the Kids Zoo area, children can interact with domesticated animals.

Admission to the zoo is $3 for adults and $1 for children ages 2 through 12.

Hours at the zoo are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekends.

Opening this fall will be the new aquarium which will feature the state's most complete collection of native fish.

Also opening soon will be the Hibernia Bank Pavilion providing shelter and large special events.

The zoo also plans to open a $1 million animal hospital this fall featuring a residency and intern program in conjunction with the LSU School of Veterinary Medicine. The facility is funded in part by a state capital outlay.

All BREC activities, programs, and services are funded with taxes paid residents of East Baton Rouge Parish and from the income BREC generates from admissions and programs.

The state Legislature created BREC in 1944 to develop a parishwide park system.

For information on any of the parks or programs, contact the BREC main office on N. Sherwood Forest Drive at 272-9200.

They're wild about reading at the EBR Library

By CHÉRÉ COEN
Staff features story writer

Children are being asked to get wild this summer, and parents are encouraging this.

It's the "Wild About Reading" program at the East Baton Rouge Parish Library, the annual Summer Reading Club that promotes the use of libraries among school-age children.

Each summer, the staff of the Children's Services Division of the many branches throughout town sponsors the program.

Children, particularly second-graders who need reading practice to continue what they have learned during the past school year, are encouraged to check out books over the summer.

Children too young to read can participate as well; parents can read to them to meet the required number of books.

Children who complete the program receive coupons and free passes to area attractions, such as the Baton Rouge Zoo and the Louisiana Arts & Science Museum. Many of the library's offer half of the summer parties as well.

The East Baton Rouge Parish Library consists of the Main Library at 7711 Goodwood Blvd. and 12 branches located throughout the city. Registration for the Summer Reading Club is ongoing at all locations.

In addition to the reading club, each library will feature special summer programming for children, plus storytelling, exhibits and artistic displays.

In addition to the reading club, each library will feature special summer programming for children, plus storytelling, exhibits and artistic displays.

The programs offered are extensive and vary from adult classes and genealogical workshops to free math tutoring for teens to all sorts of children's activities.

The branches are planning concerts, film screenings, crafts, theatrical programs by Playmakers of Baton Rouge and visits from area talent. Magician Ted Lashley, for instance, visits on a regular basis, along with John "Strongman" Sullivan, who juggles heavy weights for fun, including bowling balls.

The Louisiana Sinfonia will present a series of free, informal classical concerts for all ages at several branches in June.

Summer workshops include quilt making, an "Introduction to Shakespeare" acting workshop for teens, origami, driving techniques by the East Baton Rouge Police Department and many more events.

Storytime for children is a regular feature of most branches year-round. The Main Branch continuously offers storytime for different age groups and children's films.

For a complete schedule of library activities, call your local library or the Main Library at 231-3750.
Orange barrels will line the interstates for some time

By JULIE KAY
Special to The Advocate

If you're new to the area and even if you aren't, it would be hard to miss the traffic slowdowns, roadblocks, orange signs, barrels and temporary medians on our interstate system.

It will be with us a while, so don't get too impatient.

Baton Rouge has been experiencing growing pains for some time, said Gordon Nelson, district construction engineer with the Department of Transportation and Development, who said the time had come to try and ease the pain.

Plans for the construction have been in the works for nearly eight years, and work began on the project in July.

I-10 is being widened to four lanes east and west bound between Acadian Thruway and the I-10/I-12 split. I-12 will be widened to three lanes each way between the split and Airline Highway.

Overpasses are also being rebuilt over Jefferson Highway.

Planners for the original interstate system simply didn't anticipate the rapid rate of growth in the region, Nelson explained.

The $70 million project, which began last July, was awarded to a Michigan firm, Angelo Infrate Construction Co., by bidding process. The firm, in turn, has hired local subcontractors.

The project is allotted 1,200 calendar days with a $15,000 a day incentive to finish early. All totaled, the company stands to pick up an extra $6 million if all goes well.

"The way it looks right now, it may be late 1999 to early 2000," Nelson said. "A late construction date could be late 2000, always dependent on weather."

People new to the area should be aware of reduced speeds in construction zones, and should carefully maneuver through those zones, he said.

The top speed limit is 55 mph. However, signs signal reduced speeds of 45 mph through the construction zones.

And if you missed the signs, there are hefty traffic fines if you

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The Governmental Building is home to the Mayor's office, the Metropolitan Council, the District Attorney's office, the Parish Attorney's office, the Assessor's office, District Court and the Clerk Court's office.

The Registrar of Voters office, the Alcoholic Beverage Control office, theCoroner's office and other offices are also located there.

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City-parish faces infrastructure problems

Officials making progress, but traffic and drainage top $1 billion needs list

By ADRIAN ANGELETTE

The next mayor of East Baton Rouge Parish will have little time to settle into office before having to devise a solution to huge sewer, traffic and drainage problems.

Three-term Mayor Tom Ed McHugh said he doubts he will take a major tax proposal to voters before leaving office at the end of 2000. Voters aren't in the mood to pass new taxes and the cost of fixing parish infrastructure problems far exceeds $1 billion, he said.

East Baton Rouge Parish has progressed, though.

A year ago, work began on a $69 million project to widen Interstate 10 and Interstate 12. The state's three-year project calls on Angelo Istritate Construction Co. of Warren, Mich., to widen I-12 from just west of Airline Highway to I-10 split and I-10 from I-12 to Acadian Thruway.

That project has restricted traffic to two lanes at most times and occasionally to one lane.

In recent years, the city-parish has relied heavily on gambling riverboats and a half-cent pothole tax to tackle traffic problems on local streets. The riverboats provide about $10 million to $12 million annually and McHugh has used most of the money for road, sewer and drainage projects.

Parish voters renewed the pothole tax last year and also gave the Metro Council the authority to spend 60 percent of the tax revenue on new roads. Over the next five years, the city-parish will have about $78 million to complete 10 roadway projects listed in the tax election. In addition, another $52 million in revenue from that tax will be available to repair existing roads.

City-parish, state and federal officials hope the short-term traffic snarls caused by new construction will make driving a much smaller headache in the long run.

An interstate bypass south of Baton Rouge has been proposed to draw some traffic off I-10 in the parish.

That highway would cost $1 billion or more. City-parish and state officials are looking for a way to fund it and for a route that is short enough to attract drivers without damaging environmentally sensitive areas.

Bad roads and heavy traffic might be the most visible problems facing the city-parish, but they might not be the most pressing.

Underground sewers, mostly within Baton Rouge city limits, have deteriorated to the extent that, in some places, the concrete pipe no longer exists. The dirt-lined cavity left behind by the pipe now carries sewage to treatment plants along the Mississippi River.

The city-parish has spent more than $400 million to fix suburban sewer problems and upgrade the parish's three, massive treatment plants.
**Construction**

Continued from page 9

are caught speeding through construction zones. Consider yourself warned.

Nelson advises newcomers to watch for traffic patterns and adjust accordingly.

"Be aware of rush hour traffic flow and watch for announcements of alternate roads and closures. Always post them through the local media outlets and if there is a lane closure at night, we announce those too."

The contract with the state requires that at least two lanes of traffic remain open during the day. At times there may be night work, so motorists should remain alert to changing construction patterns, he said.

Nelson said not only is there major interstate construction going on, but several intersection improvements as well, all designed to improve traffic flow in the area.

"While it's a headache for motorists, construction actually has a side benefit to the local economy," Nelson said.

"Contractors are hiring local people, plus there's money coming into Baton Rouge through hotels, restaurants and other avenues as workers come into town."

—Gordon Nelson

Construction engineer

"Contractors are hiring local people, plus there's money coming into Baton Rouge through hotels, restaurants and other avenues as workers come into town."

Few motorists enjoy construction, he admitted.

"Any construction is an inconvenience, but it does help things in the long run," he said.

In the meantime, build a little extra time to your traveling schedule.

Interstate construction is a headache now, but motorists will reap the rewards later.

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**Infrastructure**

Continued from page 10

plants.

The Environmental Protection Agency has given the city-parish until July 31 to double the sewer treatment capacity at the North Treatment Plant from 65 million gallons to 130 million gallons daily. The expansion is costing slightly more than $11 million.

McHugh and the Metro Council have allocated the first $4 million of gambling fees collected each year to fix parts of the sewers in greatest need of repair.

In recent months, the Department of Public Works has also begun using a computer modeling program to find the best way to fix the problem.

Leaks and cracks in some sewers, mostly in north Baton Rouge, allow millions of gallons of water to leak into the sewers during heavy rains, causing many of them to back up.

Improving infrastructure is just one of the major issues facing city-parish government.

Challenges to the structure of the government itself in East Baton Rouge Parish continue to make their way through the federal courts.

Almost 50 years ago, voters merged the executive branches of the separate city and parish governments in the parish.

Fifteen years ago, voters took another step by combining the legislative bodies — the City Council and Police Jury — to create the Metro Council.

McHugh and other city-parish leaders say the consolidated government is cheaper and more efficient because it eliminates duplicate services.

But, a group of black residents contend that city-parish leaders had other things in mind when they asked voters to consolidate the parish and city councils in the early 1980s.

They claim in court papers that the true objective was to dilute black residents' voting strength, particularly within the city limits of Baton Rouge, to make it more difficult for a black candidate to win election to major office.

The U.S. Department of Justice agrees and also sued the city-parish.

McHugh, his chief administrative officer, Don Nioko, and other city-parish officials deny the allegations.

A trial date has not yet been set and years could pass before all legal issues in the case are resolved.

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**Foundation preserves La. heritage**

The Foundation for Historical Louisiana presents opportunities for Baton Rouge residents to get involved in preserving their heritage.

The foundation needs new members and volunteers.

For a complimentary copy of the foundation's newsletter and a membership application, newcomers are invited to call the foundation office at 387-2661.

If you have access to a computer, visit the website at www.fhl.org.
Gov. Foster remains popular, controversial
Multimillionaire businessman entered politics after finding his state senator unresponsive

Since taking the reins of state government in January 1996, Republican Gov. Mike Foster has proven to be very popular — and at times controversial.

Foster began his term under a cloud of racial division stemming from his 1995 election, in which he won an easy runoff victory over Cleo Fields, a black Democrat who at the time was a member of Congress.

One of Foster's first acts as governor was to issue an order aimed at eliminating racial preferences in government contracts, a move that prompted thousands of black people to march in protest near the State Capitol.

Since those early weeks of his term, Foster has shown he is not one to back away from controversy.

During a special legislative session in spring 1996, Foster pushed for statewide concealed handgun permits, for limits on lawsuits and for allowing voters to directly weigh in on the fate of gambling.

During the 1997 legislative session, Foster pushed — with at least some success in each case — for education changes, putting the charity hospitals under the LSU system and revamping car insurance laws.

The Legislature is limited to considering only fiscal matters during regular sessions in even-numbered years. As a result, Foster called a special session before this year's regular session to advance his agenda.

Foster's chief objective was to change the state's community/technical college structure. A constitutional amendment to implement Foster's plan will go to voters this fall.

Oil and gas revenues, which are used to fund populist politics, now account for a relatively small part of the state's general fund budget, down from 40 percent or better.

Since the 1980s, the state has gone through a fiscal crisis and Foster promised a statewide referendum on the various forms of gambling packaged together for a single vote.

But the “local-option” faction won out, and voters across Louisiana went to the polls in November 1996 to decide the fate of each form of gambling, in separate votes, that exist in their own parishes.

Gambling continues to be a focal point of attention.

Anti-gambling forces have tried to curb gambling, but have failed to succeed. Any meaningful legislation through the Legislature has failed. The latest attempt was an effort to repeal the law that allows a land based in New Orleans. The repeal effort didn't succeed.

Meanwhile, the Foster adminis-

Gov. Mike Foster

structure. A constitutional amendment to implement Foster's plan will go to voters this fall.

During this year's regular session, Foster tried to hold the line on making any cuts in state revenue. He also tried to come up with a pay raise for public school teachers.

Irked in 1987 at the unresponsiveness of his state senator, Foster, a multimillionaire businessman, ran for the Senate and won.

He served two terms as a Democratic state senator before running for governor in 1995. He switched to the Republican Party the day he formally entered the race.

Foster parlayed an expensive media campaign that stressed “power to the people” into a governor's race victory. Coming from way behind, Foster beat out a field that included many well-known state politicians.

Foster, whose grandfather served as governor a century ago, says he's bringing a businessman's approach to government and a brand of conservatism that wasn't evident in recent political history.

Foster took out after the state's trial lawyers with a vengeance in his first special session, passing a package of bills targeting liability suits that harm businesses' bottom lines.

During the 1997 regular legislative session, Foster again locked horns with the trial lawyers — that time on car insurance.

After initial setbacks, Foster gained passage of a plan to give insured motorists a modest reduction in premiums in exchange for limits on damages uninsured motorists can recover after accidents.

The first rate reductions are supposed to show up on insurance bills this fall.

Foster's approach is far from the populism that has pervaded state government through the years.

That populist approach was most vividly embodied recently by Gov. Edwin Edwards, who was replaced by Foster after a record fourth term in office.

Edwards prided himself on being a governor of all the people — getting a large part of his support from black voters.

Since the oil industry went bust in the early 1980s, governors and legislators have been trying to reconcile populism with economic reality.
Sales tax fuels government; property taxes low

Capitol news bureau

Faced with a tight budget and many places to spend money, the Legislature in May renewed $342 million of sales taxes on food, utilities and some other traditionally exempt items.

The 3-cent tax on food, utilities and some other items was set to expire June 30, at the end of the 1997-98 fiscal year, but Gov. Mike Foster urged renewal of the taxes to keep his initiatives on track.

Foster has been pumping more money into education, and he said that would be difficult to do without renewal of the taxes.

The state exempted food, utilities and some other goods and services from its 4 percent sales and use tax until 1986. That’s what it began taxing those items — for one or two years at a time — to offset declining oil and gas revenue.

In 1996, the Legislature voted to continue taxing those items at the full 4 percent rate through June 30, 1997, and then at 3 percent through June 30 this year. The Legislature recently voted to extend the 3 percent tax on food and utilities for another two years.

Each penny of what are sometimes called “temporary taxes,” because they are levied for only a few years at a time, generates about $114 million for the state.

Even without that tax on what were traditionally exempt purchases, Baton Rouge still has an 8 percent general sales tax rate levied on most goods and services — state and local governments each levy a 4 percent general sales tax.

The sales tax is by far the largest contributor to state government coffers.

State revenue makes up about $5.9 billion of the $12 billion annual state budget. General sales taxes account for more than $2 billion of that.

The next biggest contributors are individual income tax — about $1.5 billion — and mineral revenue and corporate income/franchise taxes — about $600 million each.

Although the state has the constitutional authority to levy a small property tax, it does not do so. Property taxes have traditionally been left to local governments and school boards. Homeowners and industries enjoy big breaks from property taxes.

Local governments can’t levy an income tax. That is reserved to state government.

State government has been reaping a windfall recently from higher oil and gas prices and renewed exploration and production in the Gulf of Mexico and across south Louisiana.

However, oil prices have softened. And, because state mineral revenues are tied to the price of oil, state leaders have been conservative with estimates of mineral revenue for the year ahead.

The state also collects business income taxes and gets a share of the take from what is now a large gambling industry.