Making life better

Downtown

By CHAD CALDER
Advocate business writer


Over the last two decades, city officials, private industry and outside consultants have come up with numerous plans to reverse the post-war suburban sprawl that left downtown Baton Rouge a graveyard on evenings and weekends.

And while this effort spawned a number of plans and initiatives over the years, certain projects emerged repeatedly, each deemed essential to bringing downtown back to life.

The Downtown Development District

The DDD, a political subdivision of the state designed to manage the city's efforts to rejuvenate the downtown area, was first envisioned in 1983 in Mayor Pat Screen's Baton Rouge 2000 plan.

The legislature passed the bill the following year creating the district, though it wasn't until 1987 that the 10-mill property tax in the downtown area was passed to fund it.

The DDD has since been at the center of all of the initiatives to revitalize downtown.

A convention hotel and expanded convention center

Work crews broke ground in July on Argosy's 10-story, 300-room Centrox Centre Convention Hotel at the corner of St. Philip and France streets, though its construction was a long time coming, to say the least.

Envisioned in Baton Rouge 2000, 1997's Baton Rouge 2000 Update and the Riverfront Development Plan the same year, a convention hotel was seen as a way to bring people downtown around the clock. In 1988, the idea of a two-tower hotel mixing office space and hotel rooms on the convention center's surface parking lot surfaced, though the office element proved controversial, said Davis Rhorer, executive director of the DDD.

What's more, a feasibility study showed a $14 million deficit between what the banks would finance and what it would cost to build.

Then, the state economy went south and the idea died, only to be resurrected again in 1992 when Jazz Enterprises Inc. promised a convention hotel to secure a gaming license for its riverboat, the Belle of Baton Rouge.

Third Street was still the holiday shopping center of Baton Rouge in 1961. But increasing competition outside downtown prompted a number of experiments. For a time the street was closed to traffic and renamed Riverside Mall. But a few years later, Bon Marche and numerous other shopping centers would attract much of the downtown business district's retail revenue.
Hopes for the hotel's construction faded, though. Argosy, the boat's new owner, had trouble financing the project.

A couple of press conferences in the mid-1990s produced promises that construction would soon begin, only to have the deals fall apart.

In the meantime, the Convention and Visitors Bureau did a study that found the convention center was woefully lacking in space and that Baton Rouge would fall hopelessly behind in attracting conventions if it was not expanded.

An increase in the hotel-motel tax was passed in the spring of 1999 to fund the $30 million expansion.

At the same time, Argosy refinanced a portion of its debt, allowing it to finance the hotel project itself and the long-awaited convention hotel was born.

"A convention hotel and an expanded Centreplex puts people downtown at night and on weekends," Rhorer said. "This will help strengthen the retail entities downtown and help new ones to open up.

The Capitol Complex

Also a major component of both Baton Rouge 2000 and the update, local leaders recognized early on the way to bring life downtown is to put more people to work there.

In 1990, the Legislature passed the bill for the Capitol Complex, a plan to consolidate state government buildings downtown.

The plan, projected to cost $174 million and expected to be completed in 2005, would give state government more than a million square feet of office space and 1.7 million square feet of parking garages downtown.

Total state employment in the downtown district will increase by some 5,000 people when the Capitol Complex is finished.

All this added to the city-parish and state government buildings that already exist downtown, as well as the city, state and federal courts.

This infusion of more government workers downtown is expected to spur the development of retail and services to support it, making it the linchpin for much of the hopes for downtown Baton Rouge.

"I'm expecting a lot of things to happen just because of the center volume of people coming downtown," Rhorer said.

Redeveloping the riverfront

The Riverfront Development Plan sprang from the 2000 update in 1987, and focused on rejuvenating the riverfront area, which already featured the USS Kidd, the Louisiana Arts and Science Center and the nearby Old State Capitol.

This plan included the tiered steps, lighting and seating along the 3,000-foot stretch of levee from Caftish Town to the foot of Laurel Street.

Rhorer said plans are afoot to make a boardwalk out of the additional 2,000 feet to the Pentagon Barracks.

In 1990 the city-parish built a $1.6 million general purpose desk, used primarily by Delta Steamboat Co., which owns the Delta Queen, the Mississippi Queen and the American Queen.

Caftish Town

In 1983, local attorney Jerry Dodson converted a portion of Baton Rouge's deteriorated warehouse district into the Caftish Town festival marketplace, with a mix of entertainment space, restaurants and retail shops.

The city-parish approved the historical name of that area near Beauregard Town, where Caftish were said to be found fishing on the ground after floods receded.

With the end of that project, the death of other retail and entertainment options downtown and the economic push of the mid- to late-1980s was the death of it.

The next incarnation of Caftish Town was an office park.

Resolution Trust Corp., created by the federal government to close failed savings and loan institutions, set up shop there in the late 1980s, employing about 400 people.

Jazz Enterprises took over in 1993 and added the glass roof, using the atrium as an entrance to the riverboat.

Without the planned hotel, however, the few restaurants that must shut up their doors soon closed, with at least one filing suit against Argosy claiming retail could not survive there without a hotel.

Today, part of the atrium is expected to be incorporated into Argosy's new convention hotel, serving as the lobby and entertainment and meeting room area.

Street improvements

Though planners have had their eyes on downtown streets from the beginning, 1998's Plan Baton Rouge was the most ambitious on this front because it aimed to make the city center a pedestrian-friendly district with all retail, service and entertainment options available to those who live, work and play there.

The $450,000 plan, funded equally by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, the city-parish and the state and funded out of the Florida-based design firm of Dunay-Plater-Zyberk & Co., had several street changes initiatives.

The $1.5 million realignment of the curve at Government Street and River Road, a project currently in the works, is perhaps the most ambitious.

The curve, planners have said, should be sharper because it will slow motorists down, be more pedestrian friendly, make room for an expanded convention center and improve traffic on both sides of the road.

Also, accentuating Seventh Street's role as a connecting corridor between downtown's two residential neighborhoods, Beauregard Town and Spanish Town, was discussed.

The plan also called for bringing Third Street back to life as downtown's retail strip, as well as blocking off Laurel Street where it meets River Road and creating a small public park.

Plan Baton Rouge called for other changes as well.

Downtown's many surface parking lots, it suggested, could be filled with retail businesses.

A public hearing was held in June to decide where to plant 300 trees downtown.

"The more of these things that pop up that are pedestrian friendly and allow people to get their things done downtown before they go home, the better," said downtown developer and broker Ben Taylor.

Private Development

Every downtown initiative has tipped its hat to the importance of private sector investment, though developers have always been hesitant to jump in to rejuvenate downtown first.

As some of the larger projects begin rolling, however, this is starting to change, from the emergence of a coffee shop on Third Street to grand plans for a hotel and apartment tower.

And Taylor said that as state workers begin coming downtown, that will create demand for retail and services the private sector will rush to meet.

"It's all market driven," he said. "If you can get the people there, it will happen."

A number of tax incentives were developed over the last 10 years, though planners have had their eyes on bigger development projects to spur the smaller ones.

Baton Rouge 2000 called for the restoration of the former Capitol House hotel back in 1983, though few were willing to step forward and put up the money to do so.

An unrelated effort in the early 1990s failed, developer Bob Dean bought the hotel for $3 million, with plans to resurrect it as the Heidelberg Hotel.

Dean, however, has yet to announce financing and a start date for the project.

Developers Rick Hartley and David Vey stepped forward with plans to build a 26-story mixed use tower at the corner of Florida and Lafayette streets.

The building would include 77,000 square feet of office and retail space, 10 floors of office space, 10 floors of residential space, and 282,000 square feet of parking.

Plans for the tower were filed just ahead of Metro Council approval of Plan Baton Rouge, which would have subjected it to an 11-story height limit, an aesthetic component of the plan.

One private sector component of Plan Baton Rouge that has yet to be realized is a movie theater on Third Street.

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