The flight of many Baton Rougenians to the suburbs has cut the tax base and has hurt downtown, so the Baton Rouge Area Foundation decided to do something about it.

"We have separated ourselves into a bad pattern," said John Davies, president and chief executive officer of the foundation. Neighborhoods are carved up by race and income, and downtown and the inner city are suffering for it, he said.

To thwart the exodus to the suburbs, the foundation solicited Miami planning firm Duany Plater-Zyberk to develop a new plan for downtown.

By invigorating the city center, the foundation hopes to improve the quality of life there and in adjacent neighborhoods while relieving congestion in the sprawling suburbs.

"A healthy community is where you have people of all economic levels living together, understanding each other, and sharing space," Davies said.

If more people stay in the city, the tax base should stop shrinking, which will help the city-parish solve community problems, Davies said.

"We're losing our tax base. We can't continue to lose population to out of (the) parish," he said.

Those are the primary reasons the foundation got involved in "new urbanism," the effort to revamp downtown to embrace the simple principle that it is better to live, work and play within smaller neighborhoods.

The foundation usually gives its money to charity, but occasionally takes the calculated risk of venturing into public policy. For example, the foundation put up $10,000 to fund the Local Initiatives Support Corp., which assists community groups to revitalize neighborhoods.

"We basically are venture philanthropists," said Davies.

The foundation serves community philanthropists, overseeing and administering their gifts. Each year the foundation grants more than $2 million to non-profits and charities.

This latest foray into community planning follows the foundation's philosophy of supporting the community in diverse ways. By forking up $150,000 of its own money and convincing the city-parish and state to do the same — the foundation is taking a good risk, Davies said.

"As long as our goals and intentions are good, then if it fails, it fails," Davies said. "It's happened before, and we don't consider that daunting. If we didn't fail occasionally our board would think we were not taking enough chances."

If the city-parish adopts new planning rules for downtown, Davies said, the foundation will push for the same approach in the rest of the city.

The foundation signed a $450,000 contract with Duany Plater-Zyberk, the Miami firm picked to create the downtown master plan.

Davies said the foundation grew interested in traditional urban planning after a 1997 lecture in Baton Rouge by Stefanos Polyzoides, a leader in traditional urban planning.

"We liked the philosophy of planning," Davies said. "We don't have resident experts in this approach."

The foundation can afford to be generous. In 1996, the latest year available, the foundation reported assets of $39 million and controlled another $25 million. In that same year the foundation doled out $23 million to charitable groups, a 30 percent jump from the prior year.

The foundation's money comes from gifts, most from just a few wealthy local families, Davies said.

Davies is paid $124,000 a year to oversee the foundation's daily operations. The other officers are: J. Terrell Brown, chairman, F. Charles McMains Jr., vice chairman; Mary Ann Sternberg, secretary, and William C. Potter, treasurer.


The foundation's beneficiaries are dozens of local charities, churches, hospitals, schools, support organizations and other groups. They are divided into seven main areas of support: arts and humanities, community development, education, environment, human services, medical and health, and religion.

The following is a breakdown of just those organizations which the foundation gave $10,000 or more in 1996:

- Boy Scouts of America, Istrouma Area Council, $10,000;
- Cerebral Palsy Association of Greater Baton Rouge, $10,000;
- Lane Memorial Hospital, $10,000;
- Local Initiatives Support Corp., $100,000.

Donations directed by the donors were:
- Academic Distinction Fund Inc., $11,000;
- Baton Rouge Area Foundation Office, $30,470;
- Boy Scouts of America, Istrouma Area Council, $16,659;
- Capital Area CASA Association, $10,000;
- Capital Area United Way, $2,660;
- Community Fund for the Arts, $11,000;
- First United Methodist Church, $10,000;
- Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank, $32,550;
- Louisiana State University Foundation, $89,900;
- Parents Against Childhood Cancer, $10,000.
- Pennington Biomedical Research Foundation, $10,000;
- Roman Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, $12,500;
- Swine Palace Productions $37,700;
- University Presbyterian Church, $11,000;
- Volunteer Baton Rouge, $16,000.
- Ascension Fund Office, $34,659;
- Capital Area United Way, $12,500;
- Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank, $968,387;
- Berryville Foundation for Academic Excellence Office, $10,274;
- Louisiana Nature Conservancy, $14,000.
- Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center, $11,281;
- Roman Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, $17,688;
- Cynthia M. Seymour, $10,000;
- Young Women's Christian Association Baton Rouge Area, $18,756;
- Louisiana State University Scholarships, $15,500.