Helping business boom

BY DEANH SMITH

The East Baton Rouge Parish economy is humming along smoothly, partly because the city-parish government is doing its job, economists and business leaders said.

"The city government is an economic engine," said Jimmy Lyles, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce. Tim Ryan, dean of the College of Business Administration at the University of New Orleans, said assessing the impact of any local government on its area economy is difficult, but that the impact of the Baton Rouge government is obviously significant.

The city-parish government employs 4,202 people full-time and has a 1999 projected payroll of $137.7 million.

"That's a big business," Lyles said. "It's not only the employment..." Lyles said. "They hire contractors and consultants. They buy paper and they buy paper clips." He said the city-parish government is a stabilizing force in the local economy, Lyles said.

An aerial view of the Mall of Louisiana, which one economist said is a sign that the city-parish government is performing well. Commercial construction would not be booming in Baton Rouge if the local government were viewed negatively.

The city-parish's image is important to businesses that are considering moving to Baton Rouge, White said. The taxes imposed by the city-parish and the quality of services and infrastructure are factors a business considers.

Metro Councilman Pat Culbertson, also an LSU economics professor, said there is "no question" that the city-parish is operating efficiently without overtaxing its residents and businesses.

"Our economy is doing very well," Culbertson said. "We are doing the right things here.

Ryan said the recent construction of a mall, apartment complexes and office buildings in East Baton Rouge Parish indicates the private sector also thinks the city-parish is doing a good job.

"It looks like there is confidence in the government and how the government is doing its job because they are spending their money," Ryan said. "Government's impact is enormous if they are doing their job.

However, Culbertson said the city-parish could be doing some things better. Culbertson said the local government must do a better job of getting companies to move corporate offices here. Also, he said luring businesses to the technology sector to Baton Rouge should be a higher priority.

He said Southern University and LSU are turning out well-trained, "world-class" students, but that too many are moving elsewhere for better opportunities. And Lyles said the city-parish, particularly the Metro Council, should be more business-friendly.

He said that often businesses meet planning requirements and get favorable recommendations from the planning staff for new business or expansion plans. "Then the city council rejects what you want to do because of an outcry of the citizens, but business has followed the checklist. You get a black eye as a community," Lyles said.

Also, the process for planning approval and zoning changes is tedious, he said. "It is not very friendly toward business. It's just cumbersome," he said. However, city-parish officials are happy to help work out problems when they arise, Lyles said.

"I find the city government here more receptive to sitting down and helping people work through their problems," he said.