‘Horizon’ panel seeks more input

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What kind of community do East Baton Rouge Parish residents want in the next 20 years? How should the government turn that vision into reality? And what kind of taxes are people willing to pay to make it all possible?

A special planning project, “Horizon: Citizens Planning The Future,” is designed to give residents a forum to voice their concerns and put forth their ideas on the subject.

Residents can do so at public meetings (the first series concluded in September, the second is scheduled to begin in February) or by calling the Horizon plan office.

Residents say public participation so far has been disappointingly light, however, and certain segments of the population have been underrepresented.

Black residents, people under 35 and those who rent rather than own their homes have not turned out in proportion to the percentage of population they comprise, officials acknowledge.

Members of the Horizon Plan Steering Committee have formed a special subcommittee to develop methods of attracting a larger and more representative sampling of the parish’s population.

And consultants hired to formulate the master plan have some idea of what the parish is most likely to become in the next two decades.

East Baton Rouge Parish, they predict, will continue to experience a net population loss of about five percent a year for the next five years, but by the year 2010 the parish is expected to contain about 500,000 residents, a net gain of more than 100,000 over current census estimates.

The consultants are not counting on a great deal of expansion within the petrochemical industry — not unless the federal government radically revises its air quality standards.

They are expecting more employment in service industries and in the kind of light manufacturing that could be stimulated by the presence of facilities such as CAMD.

Mike McAnelly, the head of the consulting team hired to formulate the master plan, said the consultants can make a number of educated guesses about future land use, population and employment — and the transportation, flood control and other public service needs that go with them — by observing existing conditions and trends and determining what areas of the parish are most or least suitable for particular types of development.

What the consultants cannot determine without public input, however, is what the people of the community want to occur here.

But McAnelly said that the district meetings already held did generate considerable information that will be extremely useful in preparing for the next phase of the project.

The first round of district meetings showed, somewhat predictably, that residents of different areas of the parish are concerned about different things.

The capital construction needs that a major bond issue would address rank high among the concerns of people in suburban areas, where most of the growth has occurred and where people drive every day on major traffic arteries that were never built to handle their present traffic volume, he said.

At the same time, he said, residents of the already developed inner city areas are plagued with vacant and dilapidated commercial and residential buildings, joblessness and crime.

McAnelly said the project is intended to provide answers to questions about how to improve the quality of life in the inner city.

Downtown Development District Executive Director Davis Rhorer recently provided one concrete example of a development policy that could spur economic growth in the inner city: Restricting new department stores to the downtown business district and not permitting them anywhere else.

Planning Director Bob Dolese said that while it is impossible to say at this stage whether such a suggestion will be incorporated into the master plan, the idea Rhorer tossed out at a recent steering committee meeting points to a larger question planners and decision-makers will have to consider: “Should we continue to develop into the suburban areas or should we say that there’s not going to be any more of that and bring future development into the city where the infrastructure already is?”

The Horizon project, scheduled for completion in the spring of 1989 at a cost of about $1 million, will generate a policy statement that, when adopted by the Metro Council, will govern public policy decisions regarding public and private development in East Baton Rouge Parish.

One result officials hope to obtain from the project is a major capital improvement program, something that the city-parish has gone without since 1985.

Officials estimate the city-parish is more than $300 million behind on road and drainage construction needed to accommodate the growth that has already taken place.

A bond issue large enough to address that problem would require a sizable tax increase, and city-parish officials hope the Horizon process will provide them with the information they need to formulate a capital improvement bond issue that reflects what people want and are willing to pay for.

But the capital improvement bond issue that officials hope to see come out of Horizon is only one of many components of the program, officials stress.

Areas to be covered by the master plan include land use, environment, solid waste, transportation, drainage, recreation, health, social services, public safety facilities in general (such as enforcement, fire protection and other public service areas) and housing.

While the master plan economic development plan officials said since its beginning, significantly impacted economic development.