Dark Days For DDA

POLITICAL SMOKE
HANGS OVER
THE DOWNTOWN
DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY.

Jefferson Street has literally been falling in. Three times over the last couple of years, the city has had to repair sinkholes in the street caused by the aged sewer and drainage system. Armentor, an attorney, fears that the city would be liable if an accident occurs.

But that’s just one example in an area that doesn’t seem to have a sidewalk without a crack. “The infrastructure is shot. The streets are shot. It needs some improvement. It’s time to do that improvement,” he says.

It was against this backdrop that DDA officials showed up at the City Council meetings, it would have been in effect for only 60 days. Then, on Nov. 6, Bowen vetoed the ordinance, saying he was concerned about liability issues and the cost of independent legal services to the DDA. “My quarrel is not with the Downtown Development Authority or with the City Council’s decision to provide funding to that independent political subdivision,” Bowen said in a letter accompanying his veto. On a 3-2 vote, the council failed to override the veto last week.

DDA does not exactly have universal support on the City Council. “If DDA had never existed, downtown would be better off today,” says council president F.V. “Pappy” Landry. Councilman Elmo Laborde Jr. says, “If we have to, we can accomplish the goals of the city without DDA.”

At press time, DDA employees had not received Bowen’s proposed budget was to be released. They had met with Bowen and had been told they would be funded. Fifteen minutes after the City Council meeting started, they discovered the item was not in the budget. “A zero balance in the budget, that was a huge surprise,” says Armentor.

Bowen did not respond to several requests from The Times for comment.

Armentor on several occasions had asked Webre to take information supporting DDA’s budget and projects to Bowen. Webre had tried but had been unable to see the mayor. After the budget came out, Armentor met with Bowen, and the mayor said he felt that the DDA staff was not communicating with him. It was evident, says Armentor, that Bowen had not seen the material left by Webre.

DDA has a seven-member board of directors, and the DLU board numbers that total 30. Bowen had been putting together a plan to reorganize, try to pass the property tax and wean DDA from city support over a two-year period. The City Council cut DDA’s funding from $113,000 to $90,000 for the current fiscal year, which was still $90,000 more than Bowen’s first proposal. The council passed an ordinance beginning the process of dissociaiting from the city, but because of legal and insurance ques-

By Jane Nicholes

Incam was the only developer to respond to requests for proposals on the project during the summer.

Commissioner of Administration Raymond Laborde had indicated he would seek the building by bid after Sept. 1. It is believed that the deal wouldn’t be ready, Armentor says DDA asked Bowen to intercede with Gov. Edwin Edwards and get an extension, which the mayor did.

“The mayor is very excited about the project, particularly about the possibility to cost the city any money,” says Armentor.

But in yet another contradiction, a few weeks ago Bowen asked members of the banking community to lunch, where he tried to interest them in investing in the project to get tax credits. Neither DDA nor DLU was invited. Armentor got wind of the meeting and crashed it. He says bankers for the most part weren’t interested because the tax credits work best for highly affluent investors who need tax breaks, and Lafayette area financial institutions haven’t been in that position since the boom years.

Yet a couple of weeks later, Bowen met with representatives of DDA, DLU, the developer, the Greater Lafayette Parish Chamber of Commerce and city and parish governments, and at that meeting indicated that he supported DDA as the leader of the project. DDA officials came away feeling positively; then Bowen vetoed the ordinance.

On Friday, Bowen conducted a tour of the central business district for local business people. [The Times and other news media were not invited, though representatives of the Daily Advertiser were present.

The editor of The Times happened upon the event and heard some of Bowen’s comments. He told those present that this was the beginning of his initiative for downtown and talked about the possibility of transporting the Portal Square building into headquarters for the Police Department.

The Evangeline Hotel project appears to be on track, and it could well be the catalyst that turns downtown around. Downtown supporters maintain that a vibrant center is crucial for any city. Not only does it offer a central sense of community, but the condition of downtown can impress businesses looking to locate in a city, and it also can just as easily turn them off.

But two other downtown projects are in limbo. The Jefferson Street improvements are part of the public works capital budget that has not been approved by the City Council, which appropriated money but has not presented with a list of priorities. Public works officials have also said that more drainage work might be needed at the project. And the City Council has indicated that building’s former office building on the corner of Jefferson Street at Porter Street will be available for use by the Port of South Plaquemines.

The hotel project was suggested as a site for the State Capitol Museum, the state legislature was planning to move to the city’s downtown area. But in another contradiction, a few weeks ago Bowen asked members of the banking community to lunch, where he tried to interest them in investing in the project to get tax credits. Neither DDA nor DLU was invited. Armentor got wind of the meeting and crashed it. He says bankers for the most part weren’t interested because the tax credits work best for highly affluent investors who need tax breaks, and Lafayette area financial institutions haven’t been in that position since the boom years.