City planners believe they can make downtown Baton Rouge into a place where people will want to live and work and where people will walk instead of drive.

Editor's note: Work has begun on a new master plan for downtown Baton Rouge. Today The Advocate looks at what to expect, and how similar plans have worked in other cities. We also look at the unusual public-private partnership that is behind this effort.

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Consultants drawing up a new master plan for downtown Baton Rouge will use ideas that have been tried and tested in other American cities. If the Metro Council enacts the planners' suggestions later this year, people downtown may find:
- Lower speed limits.
- Some one-way streets returned to two-way traffic.
- Height restrictions on new buildings.
- Uniform building standards on certain blocks regulating details such as the colors of paint and type of construction materials that can be used.
- Reduced red tape for downtown developers.
- A system of parking garages to replace surface lots.
- Existing parking lots landscaped with hedges and shade trees.

Those are a few of the means planners have used in other cities that have embraced "new urbanism," an old-fashioned approach to urban planning.

Why should Baton Rouge need such things? Because it's a half-empty, poorly planned place, said Andres Duany, a principle in the Miami design firm Duany Plater-Zyberk, which has won the contract to create the master plan.

"There is much evidence of bad planning in place," Duany said. "People don't have confidence in the (existing) plans are working."

For example, parking garages are in inefficient places along the edges of downtown, not in the center of the district, Duany said.

Also, there are too many surface parking lots. The area between North Third Street and Interstate 110 is littered with surface lots devoid of trees or landscaping. People have no incentive to walk in such places, but walking is exactly how Duany wants Baton Rougeans to get around downtown.

Duany's firm is getting $450,000 to draw up the new master plan for downtown at the request of the private Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

The public will get chances to speak up too. Sometime later this summer, planners will hold a week of meetings with the public to hear complaints, ideas and suggestions.

Only after that "charrette," or planning session, will the planners present their master plan to the founda-

Planners say surface parking lots, like this one at Lafayette Street and North Boulevard, are a bane of downtown.

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Planning DOWNTOWN

This map shows downtown vacant buildings and surface parking lots, two problems planners say must be overcome to revitalize the area. Some surface parking lots slated for construction are not shown.

The Baton Rouge Area Foundation, the city-parish and the state have hired Miami planners Duany Plater-Zyberk to create a new master plan. The planners’ goals include making it easier for developers to bring vacant buildings back into commerce and finding new uses for surface parking areas.

Mayor Tom Ed McHugh

Duany said. Then the consultants must convince the public and local planners that theirs is the better method of improving the area.

“The policy has been to make parking convenient, not to make it hard to reverse that policy,” Duany said.

The ideal is those who remain downtown are rewarded for living here,” he said. Indeed, two of downtown’s biggest assets are its nearby historic residential neighborhoods, Spanish Town and Bearabad Town.

Baton Rouge is not the only city with a decaying downtown. For decades scores of American downtowns have emptied while suburbs unfurl like concrete carpet all around them. But by revitalizing downtown, city planners hope to slow that suburban sprawl.

In the past decade the DPZ firm has drawn up master plans for downtowns in such cities as Providence, R.I., Trenton, N.J., and West Palm Beach, Fla.

Providence and Trenton are similar to Baton Rouge in that they are state capitals where state government has a major presence, and both were largely vacant and surrounded by growing suburbs.

Five years after DPZ drew up its plan, Providence today has good prospects for downtown growth thanks to some changes to its code, said John Palmieri, the city’s director of planning.

Providence’s downtown is one mile square, and like Baton Rouge, features an area of retail, another of state buildings plus some residential neighborhoods.

It also counts an ample stock of Victorian buildings which are either empty and unused. Artists now live in lofts above galleries and sell their work free of sales tax thanks to special incentives to draw them there. The Rhode Island legislature even passed a law to exempt artists working downtown from the state income tax.

During planning, residents, elected officials and developers together worked out the specifics.
"It turned out great," Stuart said. "We have so many pedestrians downtown now." Even the private landowners who at first were skeptical about being told what to do on their own property have been won over.

"It's made a very big difference, and it's simple stuff that people say 'Who cares,' but it's important," Stuart said.

"It's been demonstrated in property values going sky high since the plan was adopted," Stuart said. "When you're looking at 35 percent increases in a single year, you're looking at a significant return to the community."

"Now we have bars and restaurants and clubs, it's made for an incredible turnaround."

In Baton Rouge, the specifics of the new plan will not be settled upon for a few months, and not before the public has its say.

Stuart said that will be the key to the plan's success in Baton Rouge.

"It's the willingness of private property owners, government and the community that they have to do something with the town, and they have to be committed to making the change," Stuart said.

Not everyone jumps on board with Duany's plans. In Trenton, N.J., for example, DPZ created a plan that some people dislike.

Trenton Planning Director Allan Mallach said the plan has its shortcomings. "They came in here and developed a far too formal plan and doctrine for a downtown that's a real grabs bag of different styles and periods," Mallach said. "I saw and still see this plan as not a particularly useful document."

For example, DPZ suggested "an absolutely strict height guidance" for new buildings. The downtown was divided into imaginary concentric circles, like a bull's-eye, with the center featuring the tallest buildings and then each circle calling for gradually shorter structures.

"That to me is meaningless, making the skyline look like a pyramid is abstract aestheticism to no purpose," Mallach said.

DPZ suggested that the city adopt an urban design code, but the city planning department kept that from happening, Mallach said.

Still, DPZ's ideas have helped downtown Trenton, said Frank Moya, a Trenton architect.

"It helped people look at the city in a different way," Moya said. "The problem with many downtowns is perception. You have to change that."

Some in the community like the plan, though. Ingrid Reed is chairwoman of Trenton's redevelopment corporation, created by the New Jersey legislature to spur the revitalization of that city.

"They helped us write a code so if a developer came into town, he'd know what we are looking for in a new building," Reed said.

DPZ suggested other changes, such as narrowing a four-lane road to two lanes and creating parking on both sides, which serves to slow down the traffic and reduce the need for surface parking lots.

"We got our money's worth," Reed said of the plan, which cost Trenton $100,000.