Plan would slice up $1 billion-plus pie

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The Horizon planners identify more than a billion dollars worth of capital needs — construction projects and equipment purchases — that city-parish government should address over the next 20 years.

After federal and state dollars needed for large scale highway and flood control projects are deducted from the total, the local share of the cost comes to more than one-half a billion dollars.

The first five-year cycle of the capital improvement program would cost $529.3 million, the local share totaling about $211 million, according to the report.

The five-year program would involve spending $3.5 million on recreation and open space, $2 million on housing, $29.9 million on public buildings, $12.8 million on public services, $30,000 on health and human services, $45 million on sewerage system upgrading beyond the roughly $300 million already being spent to expand and improve the system, $138.8 million on drainage, $12.9 million on land use and more than $284 million on transportation.

Connie Jungbluth, the member of the Horizon consulting team responsible for providing financial advice, said that much of the initial $211 million local share of the program cost could be financed without new taxes if voters rededicate some existing special millages and sales taxes that are due to expire between 1993 and the end of the century.

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The Horizon planners were reluctant to recommend any substantial net increase in property taxes to pay for city-parish capital improvement programs because of the potential impact on the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board’s capital improvement plans, the report states.

The school board is contemplating a more than $400 million general obligation bond issue, secured by property taxes, and the Horizon planners recommend the city-parish refrain from competing with the school system for whatever additional property taxes local voters might be willing to pay.

“The vision of Horizon Plan includes a quality education system,” the report states. “Therefore, the intent of the Horizon financial program is to minimize any additional increases in the general property tax as much as possible and to focus on innovative funding from other sources.”

A substantial amount of the funding for transportation and drainage projects would have to come through federal and state sources, the report notes, the local share of the five-year program totaling about $84 million for transportation and about $53 million for drainage.

Under public buildings, the Horizon planners contemplate new fire and ambulance stations, a new municipal office building, new headquarters for the district attorney’s office, a coroner’s morgue, and the renovation and upgrading of several existing buildings.

The money allocated to housing would provide start-up capital for an expanded affordable housing program. The city-parish’s Office of Community and Economic Development currently provides low-interest housing rehabilitation loans for that purpose out of federal community development block grants.

An unspecified amount of the money earmarked for land use would go into riverfront and downtown development.

Most of the funds allocated to public services, land use and health and human services would be used to purchase vehicles and computer equipment that would enable the city-parish agencies involved to provide better service.

The city-parish has already developed a systematic, multi-year, $14 million equipment replacement program for the Department of Public Works and is working toward the same type of program for the fire and police departments. The computer equipment purchases contemplated by the Horizon planners would enable the city-parish’s Human Development and Services Division to act as a social service clearinghouse and enable the Planning Department to do things like perform environmental impact assessments of proposed new developments.

Such assessments would enable city-parish government to implement one of the Horizon team’s major recommendations — impact fees.

“Baton Rouge is atypical from many cities across the country and does not currently have impact fees in place,” the report states. “This allows new development to occur in the community at the cost of the whole community rather than directly paying its share of the incremental cost of needed infrastructure improvements (such as the sewer system, streets, and drainage, etc.). The implementation of impact fees is strongly recommended to reduce the amount of financing that would be needed in the future for capital improvements.”