NEIGHBORS

Population boom brings new challenges to Ascension Parish

River Parishes Bureau

Ascension Parish is one of the two fastest growing parishes in Louisiana. Along with Livingston Parish, Ascension leads the state in percentage of population growth.

New subdivisions, schools, businesses and industrial expansions are changing the landscape, but the parish retains the charm of its moss-laden bayous and graceful antebellum homes.

Located south of East Baton Rouge Parish, Ascension Parish had an estimated population of 69,905 as of 1997, according to the latest figures from Louisiana Tech University’s state population statistics.

Some analysts predict the parish population may reach anywhere from 80,000 to 100,000 by the year 2002 with most of the growth on the parish’s East Bank.

A big factor in the population explosion is the parish’s public school system, which has been undergoing a $69 million master expansion plan. Besides major school renovations, the construction of two new schools should get underway by the end of the year at Dutchtown High School and a primary school in Donaldsonville. Teacher salaries, boosted by a 21-cent property tax approved by voters in 1995, and innovative school programs also draw families from surrounding parishes.

The school system has received state and national recognition for its literacy and deaf education programs, family math and science programs, the parish chapter of the Louisiana Alliance for Education Reform, its Goals 2000 efforts, and the Ascension Fund program for educational projects.

Other educational institutions, like the state-approved and accredited Ascension Technical Institute in Sorrento, offer training in welding, drafting, nursing, office work and truck driving.

The population boom, of course, resulted in a flurry of new homes and subdivisions.

The parish approved 20 subdivisions and 222 commercial business and building permits in 1999, according to Director of Parish Planning and Zoning Barney Arnaux.

All that growth, of course, is straining existing parish infrastructure.

That’s the challenge for recently elected Parish President Harold Marchand. Marchand and the Parish Council are studying a proposed massive parish water and sewer project as well as possibly implementing parish zoning.

Besides zoning, a recent survey of 1,000 Ascension residents told Marchand and his administration that they want good schools, a low crime rate, clean air and water, quality police and fire protection and nice neighborhoods.

The survey is part of Marchand’s plan to get input from the community about where they think Ascension should be heading and where it will be by the year 2020. Marchand has held a series of “Ascension 2020” meetings throughout the parish so government and the residents can work together to reach one, common goal.

The banks of the Mississippi River, which cuts through the parish, provide industries with an ideal location.

Most of the petro-chemical plants are located in Geismar and many have experienced growth in jobs because of major expansions in the last few years.

The parish has three hospitals, two in Gonzales and one in Donaldsonville. The parish seat is in Donaldsonville, population 8,000, on the west bank.

Donaldsonville is accessible via the Sunshine Bridge on La. 70.

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