Ross Atkins, an aerial picture of South Baton Rouge is worth the proverbial thousand words. The patches of dead skin on his legs speak volumes more.

They testify to the potential and the problems of Bayou Duplantier and the streams that Duplantier flows into.

Starting at University Lake and flowing southeast, Bayou Duplantier winds mostly unseen behind subdivisions like Pollard Estates, University Hills and Plantation Trace. Joining Dawson Creek a few hundred yards west of Kenilworth Parkway, its waters eventually reach Ward’s Creek, Bayou Manchac and the Amite River, making Bayou Duplantier a major link in the city’s chain of drainage waterways.

Atkins, however, and a number of South Baton Rouge residents would like for it to be much more than that. They see fishing, canoeing, biking and hiking trails, bird watching and environmental interpretive areas. They see a recreational oasis in the heart of town.

This is not a brand new idea. Civic groups have proposed ideas to restore Bayou Duplantier—or at least prevent further development from taking place in its flood plain—for 20 years, says Ann Hise of the Bayou Duplantier Swamp Alliance. Attempts to fulfill such plans have never resulted in anything more than talk and studies.

That’s why Atkins likes the photograph. “You show them this aerial of this beautiful green area right in the middle of urbanized Baton Rouge, then they become more interested: ‘How can we preserve it?’” Atkins said. “There have been groups out there for years that have been trying to find a way to preserve it. Of course, the main obstacle is money.”

Atkins, the executive director of the Amite River Basin Commission, has an idea about that, too. The commission is supporting the proposed Comite
River Diversion Canal to lessen flooding along the Comite and Amite rivers. Since federal regulations require that projects that damage the environment of one area compensate by restoring another such area, Atkins sees Bayou Duplantier as the perfect place for restoration.

Atkins admits part of his interest in Bayou Duplantier is self-serving. To get tax money raised for Comite Diversion, he knows he’ll need support from populous and prosperous South Baton Rouge, most of which would not directly benefit from the Comite project.

The main reason, he said, is more basic—Bayou Duplantier needs help. Two attempts to canoe the bayou this summer, once with an Advocate reporter and photographer, vividly demonstrated that. Overgrowth made it impossible to begin at University Lake, and downstream logjams formed dams that captured all kinds of trash—cups, beer cans, motor oil bottles, paint cans, tennis balls, garbage cans, even one of the ubiquitous orange traffic barrels.

“Just what you call an undesirable flood control structure,” Atkins said when canoes were stopped by one such logjam. The obstructions are more than an inconvenience to would-be canoeists, Atkins said. They also make the bayou less effective in draining water from heavy rainstorms.

“Our whole water system is neglected, which is part of the problem,” he said.

As unsightly as the logs and trash are, Atkins and those who went with him are also concerned about things in the bayou they couldn’t see. After the first trip, Atkins and Whitney Austin, research geologist with the Louisiana Geological Survey, had rushes or burr spots on their legs and arms that eventually resulted in patches of dead skin.

They said the spots probably were caused by chemicals in the water.

“When we were riding down there in the canoe, I saw floating drums,” Austin said. “I don’t know what’s in those things. I saw some of these pump sprayers, you buy at the hardware store to spray chemicals. Those types of things make me wonder.”

The pollution of Bayou Duplantier and the waterways that follow it probably come less from direct dumping than from the city’s storm drainage system, Atkins said. He said trash that enters a street drain downtown, at LSU, in the Garden District and numerous other neighborhoods finds its way into Bayou Duplantier, often through University Lake. Even if nothing else is done, Atkins said, the logjams occur in the bayou, trash and canoes, and trash from the bayou and canoe, I saw floating drums,” Austin said. “I don’t know what’s in those things. I saw some of these pump sprayers, you buy at the hardware store to spray chemicals. Those types of things make me wonder.”

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Atkins would like about 600 acres set aside along both sides of Bayou Duplantier between Stanford and Kenilworth for a park that would be administered by BREC. Based on suggestions from LSU students, landscape architect Van L. Cox has drawn a possible plan with three bird sanctuaries with observation platforms, a wetlands arboretum, a fishing area, a nature study area and neighborhood gardens, with boardwalks running along both banks.

If such a park were built and the rest of the streams maintained, Atkins said a canoeist could enter the water by University Lake and leave at BREC’s Fairground Park on Ward’s Creek a few hundred yards before it enters Bayou Manchac. The area that is navigable offer a different side of Baton Rouge—egrets, herons and woodpeckers are often seen and heard—then most people experience.

—Paul Davidson of The Nature Conservancy, who accompanied Atkins on one of the canoe trips, said Austin, Texas, has a similar park.

“You don’t even know you’re in town,” Davidson said.

Atkins would like to see improvements to University Lake—making it deeper for better fishing and using the dredged soil to form islands. Also, the soil could be used to create a wetlands area in City Park Lake to help cleanse the water. Some of those ideas, however, were opposed by area residents when the lakes were deepened in the early 1800s.

All of this comes with a price tag. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates the cost of land acquisition alone would be from $4 million to $6 million. Atkins said. How much more would be needed depends on how extensive a project the people want — if it wants it at all.

It’s a big tax bill to sell to voters, but supporters of the idea say it’s worth it.

“It’s sort of nice having those types of things in an urban area,” Austin said. “I think it enhances the quality of life in Baton Rouge overall to have nice places, not just in your back yard, places where you can easily go access and enjoy something that feels like ‘I’m in the wilderness.’ It’s not really the wilderness, but it sort of gives you that feel.”