Breaux Bridge meets urban planning

USL, community working together to ensure city's growth is managed

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BREAUX BRIDGE — The unplanned growth of a city, or growth of any kind, isn't inevitable. But when growth visits a city, as it's doing to Breaux Bridge, it can become either an eyesore or a beautiful place to visit.

Breaux Bridge officials are opting for the latter, and are taking steps to ensure that manageable growth does occur.

With the help of 10 USL school of architecture students under the direction of Professor Thomas Sammons, long-range urban planning is taking shape. The task force of young city planners, armed with powerful computers and the latest ideas in urban design, are coming up with a proposal for the Breaux Bridge of the future.

Backed by the Breaux Bridge City Council and the city's director of cultural and economic development, Melanie Harrington, the task force has set up shop in offices on Bridge Street, close to City Hall. Banks of computers, walls filled with aerial photographs, huge drawing boards and a "Public Welcome" sign adorn the place. Visitors get a mini-lesson in urban planning and computer-assisted design as well as a willing audience for their ideas.

They've been since May and there they'll remain until the middle of August, many working 10- and 12-hour days. Some are earning university credit, some are on a stipend, but all are immersed in their summer project.

When they complete their work in August and make the final presentation to the City Council, that report will become the city's master plan. Harrington said her belief in the project is what will keep it from becoming merely an exercise. She is quick to add that the final product will reflect the vision of many Breaux Bridge residents, all of whom have been invited to lend their ideas and dreams for what they want to see their town become.

Although the final report is far from finished, some of the ideas gleaned from several community workshops include:

- A multi-purpose civic center located near the old sugar mill;
- A footbridge on Ruth Street;
- The four-laning of Rees Street, which is the entrance to Breaux Bridge from Interstate 10 (the state has already approved this);
- The addition of two I-10 interchanges;
- Revitalizing the neighborhoods along the former route of the railroad;
- Frontage roads along I-10; and
- A comprehensive plan for downtown.

"They didn't come with a prescribed plan," Harrington said. "What they're doing is based on the input they've received — only then did they start working on their designs."

Fifth-year architecture student Tom Smith of Lafayette sits at an IBM with Harrington looking over his shoulder. They're designing a treeline for Rees Street, and the results will be part of a presentation set for Friday.

Across the room, Thomas Fayolle of France works on a map of downtown, adding buildings and other elements that will blend in with Breaux Bridge's already unique ambience.

Brandee Duhon sits at a drawing table working on a streetscape. Half a dozen other students are bent over their projects, occasionally consulting with each other, oblivious to the visitors. But show an interest in what they're doing or ask a question, and the visitor gets a hefty dose of southern hospitality.

"Breaux Bridge is a nice scale to work in," Sammons said. "It's challenging, with the Teche Bayou and the interstate to consider, but it has interesting pieces and many qualities that we're learning from. These are things they will face in a car-oriented world: how not to lose the quality of a small town and what's appropriate for a small city."

This is the third project the task force has worked on. The first, in Lafayette, was "An Urban Framework for the Oil Center," completed summer 1996, and the other, also in Lafayette, was the Simcoe Street Corridor Project, completed in 1997. Both projects drew acclaim from the public and private sector.

The City Council is supportive. Harrington said. One council member, Tina Begnaud, has been to every community design workshop. The council has approved Harrington's grant applications for a walking trail connecting the three city parks and initially approved the $24,000 grant necessary for the work.

"This is totally about what the community wants," Harrington said. "The students are giving us objective ideas of what will work well and how we can get there."