Would-be city named, starts petition

Mayor-President Kip Holden described the effort as divisive to the parish.

"It’s a small group of people who seem like their mission is to try to separate the people and communities of this parish in any way they possibly can," he said.

Holden also said he didn’t think they would be successful with the effort.

To start the process for incorporation, 25 percent of the registered voters in an area for a proposed new city must sign a petition. For St. George, that means more than 18,000 voter signatures.

Browning said volunteers have been lining up to gather signatures for the petition.

"We haven’t even worked that hard to get it out there yet, but it’s been overwhelming," Browning said. "We have been inundated with phone calls to take petitions and get them signed."

The other co-chairmen for the incorporation effort are Dustin Yates and Joshua Hoffpauir.

There’s no official deadline for collecting the signatures, but Browning said he’d like to have it done in time to bring it to a vote next year.

In recent months, St. George supporters have been holding meetings for the community and solicited a formal poll, which Browning said shows support for incorporation.

They proposed formal boundaries for the district, which would cover all of the unincorporated part of the parish south of the city of Baton Rouge, including the East Side and St. George Fire Protection districts. The proposed city would cover about 85 square miles in total.

And they calculated their population to be 107,262 residents, potentially making St. George the sixth-largest city in the state.

The name of the city bested two other options, Highland and New Richmond. But it’s not named for the fire department, Browning said.

Rather, St. George has historical significance because more than 100 years ago, a portion of what is now East Baton Rouge Parish was a separate parish called St. George Parish, which included much of the area proposed for the new city.

Organizers of the St. George effort established a new website — www.StGeorgeLouisiana.com — providing information about the effects of incorporating and the steps to get there.

The website assures residents that basic services will continue uninterrupted. Fire protection is already funded by property taxes supporting St. George and East Side, and law enforcement will continue to be provided by the Sheriff’s Office.

The website says sewer maintenance will continue because the city would continue to pay a parishwide half-cent sales tax, but the new city government would maintain its own streets, bridges, medians, canals, and other public grounds and facilities.

The website also says taxes would not likely increase, and the new city should be able to retain its $65 million in sales tax revenue.

But Holden said the St. George organizers have not done their research.

"We are not going to just be handing over all these improvements, and all the work and buildings and tax structures that have occurred in Baton Rouge over my term and the terms of other mayors," Holden said. "They are getting bad advice."

William Daniel, Holden’s chief administrative officer, also said "it’s still very questionable” whether St. George could keep its sales tax revenue, adding that he didn’t want to elaborate until officials finish their research of the various scenarios that could play out.

Browning said the Mayor’s Office is spouting inaccurate statements about what tax revenue St. George would be entitled to.

He also said the formation of a new city would not hurt the parish because residents and businesses in the new city would continue to pay parishwide taxes.

"This isn’t about separating away from Baton Rouge; it’s about the formation of the city of St. George,” Browning said.

"We’re still going to be a vital part of East Baton Rouge Parish, and we will continue to contribute 100 percent to that parish and to be represented within the parish."