

**CHAPTER 9
THE HISTORIC CENTER: DOWNTOWN HOUMA**

INTRODUCTION

Terrebonne Parish is among the largest in terms of geographic area in the State of Louisiana. Its 2,080+ square miles are home to nearly 112,000 residents, thousands of water bodies and waterways, and acres of precious coastal wetlands. At its northern boundary lies its largest (and only) municipality and parish seat of government, Houma, founded in 1834 on land known as the Hache Grant. What began as a small six block settlement now contains a population of over 33,000 and an urban footprint just over 14 square miles in size.



Written evidence of Native American occupation has been found throughout Terrebonne Parish dating back several hundreds of years to 1682 by the French explorer, Robert de LaSalle. Houma Indians lived off this unique landscape by means of farming, hunting, trapping, and fishing. Today, the Native American Tribe contains over 17,000 members spread across six gulf south parishes. The Houma Indians were not originally native to this land. Conflict and wars with the Tunicas, another Native American tribe, caused the Houma to move and eventually settle in what is now Terrebonne Parish. Their camps and standing presence were recognized and the City came to be named Houma. As European settlements expanded, the tribes moved southward along the coastal

regions where evidence can still be found today. Despite the Bureau of Indian Affairs' decision to not federally recognize the tribe as direct descendants of the United Houma Nation, their presence remains strong and their culture greatly respected throughout Houma and the State of Louisiana.



Like many settlements, the land running along Bayou Terrebonne was cleared and developed because it was the highest. The French chose this site for Houma due to its proximity to bayous and water channels which would allow for easier commerce and trade. Today this fact still holds true, as the Houma-Terrebonne region is a center for marine fabrication and repairs, servicing vessels which work in the Gulf of Mexico and all over the world. Knowing the importance of this, Richard H. Grinage and Hubert M. Belanger laid the first groundwork for the city and today are referred to the "Fathers of Houma." As Houma grew, additional waterways were dug to travel and improve shipping times. From the creation of the Barataria channel to the Houma Navigation channel in 1962, the coastal Parish will always rely on its proximity to the Gulf. Rail was eventually developed providing Houma means of travel and trade other than waterways and roadways.





The fishing and seafood industry was the dominant economic driving force of Houma-Terrebonne up until the discovery of oil near the coast. With its navigational infrastructure already in place, the Parish became the ideal spot for oil companies to ship their product and service their fleets. In turn, ship fabricators and welding businesses began to take advantage of the influx of activity and the need for maintenance and repairs. In recent years, the Houma-Terrebonne economy has broadened. While oil and shipping remains crucial, the seafood industry has continued to flourish despite recent disasters. Additionally, the medical industry has become a driving force to Houma's economic success as Terrebonne General Medical Center has become a main employer in the area. Houma-Terrebonne offers a wide array of goods, services, and entertainment representative of authentic Cajun culture.



Outreach

Workshops were held from June 2011 to August 2011 to gain a strong insight into how local stakeholders would like to see the future of Downtown Houma. The three workshop meeting times varied to accommodate the availability of the public. Food and beverages were provided for everyone attending and local stakeholders were encouraged to show up. Dozens of stakeholders participated, including members from The Terrebonne Parish Tree Board, the D.A.'s Office, the Downtown Development Corporation, Terrebonne Parish Planning and Zoning, local law firms, restaurant owners, and several local businesses. Citizens provided input about the unique assets Downtown Houma is able to build upon as well as the challenging areas currently holding it back. The workshops are discussed in more detail below.

Presentation

The workshops began with presentations on some of Houma's assets and challenges. The identified assets focused first on Bayou Terrebonne and last on the abundance of festivals, parades, and cultured events. Additional assets included the small town scale and core proximity of important buildings, undeveloped land, and dramatic views of rich historical architecture, schools, and the Bayou Walk. Challenges included traffic levels along Main Street, blight, lack of streetscapes, sense of place, parking, water quality, and commercial critical massing. The wide range of examples allowed the attendees to broaden their ideas about what truly works for Houma and what does not, leading into the group exercises.

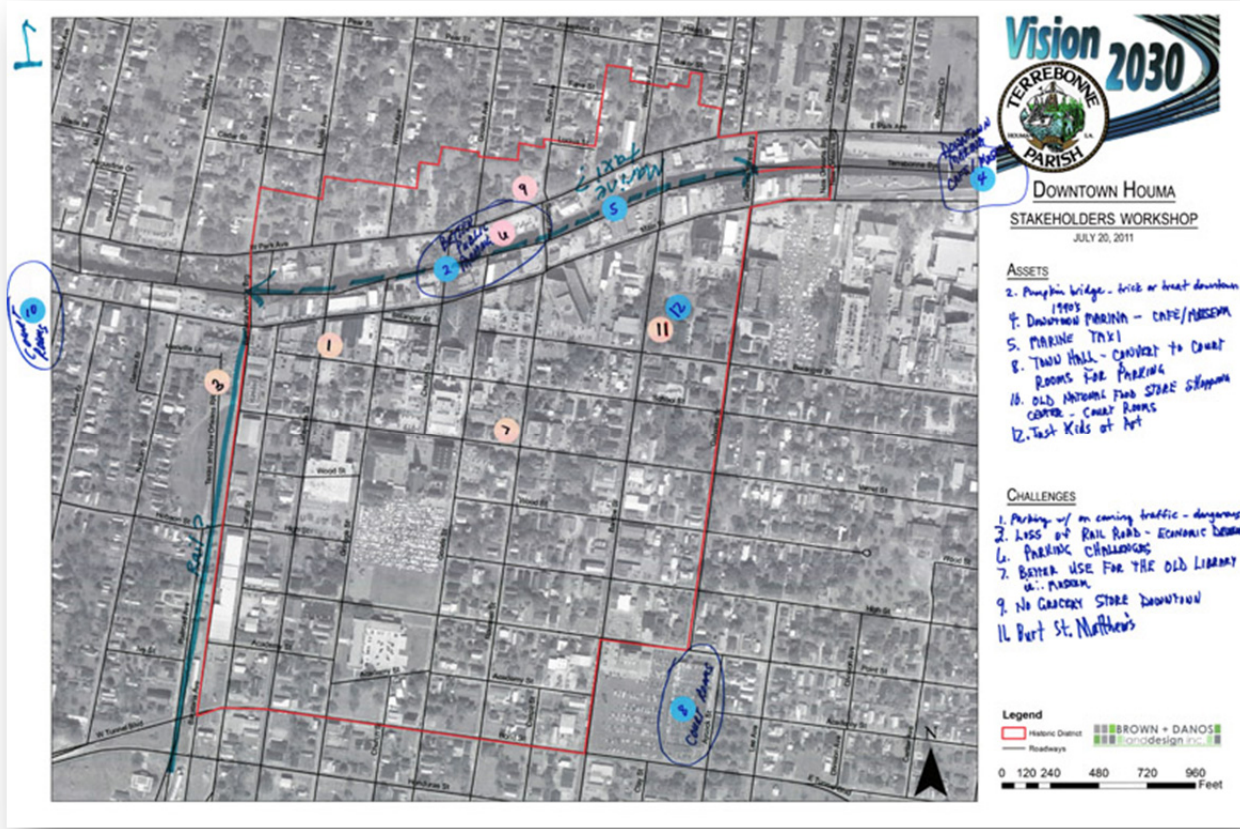




Group Exercises

The stakeholders formed groups and each were presented with a map of downtown Houma, stickers, and markers. Groups were asked to note areas that they found were either an asset to be built upon or a challenge to be remedied. Participants were encouraged to write on the maps to explain, in more detail, their views. The data from the exercises were analyzed after the three meetings and merged into a comprehensive map to illustrate patterns and clusters of similar ideas about assets and challenges.





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DOWNTOWN HOUMA
STAKEHOLDERS WORKSHOP
JULY 20, 2011

ASSETS

- ① Court Square
- ② St. Francis Church
- ③ Pezzano Park
- ④ Good parking garage
- ⑤ Future connection to walking route from bridge

CHALLENGES

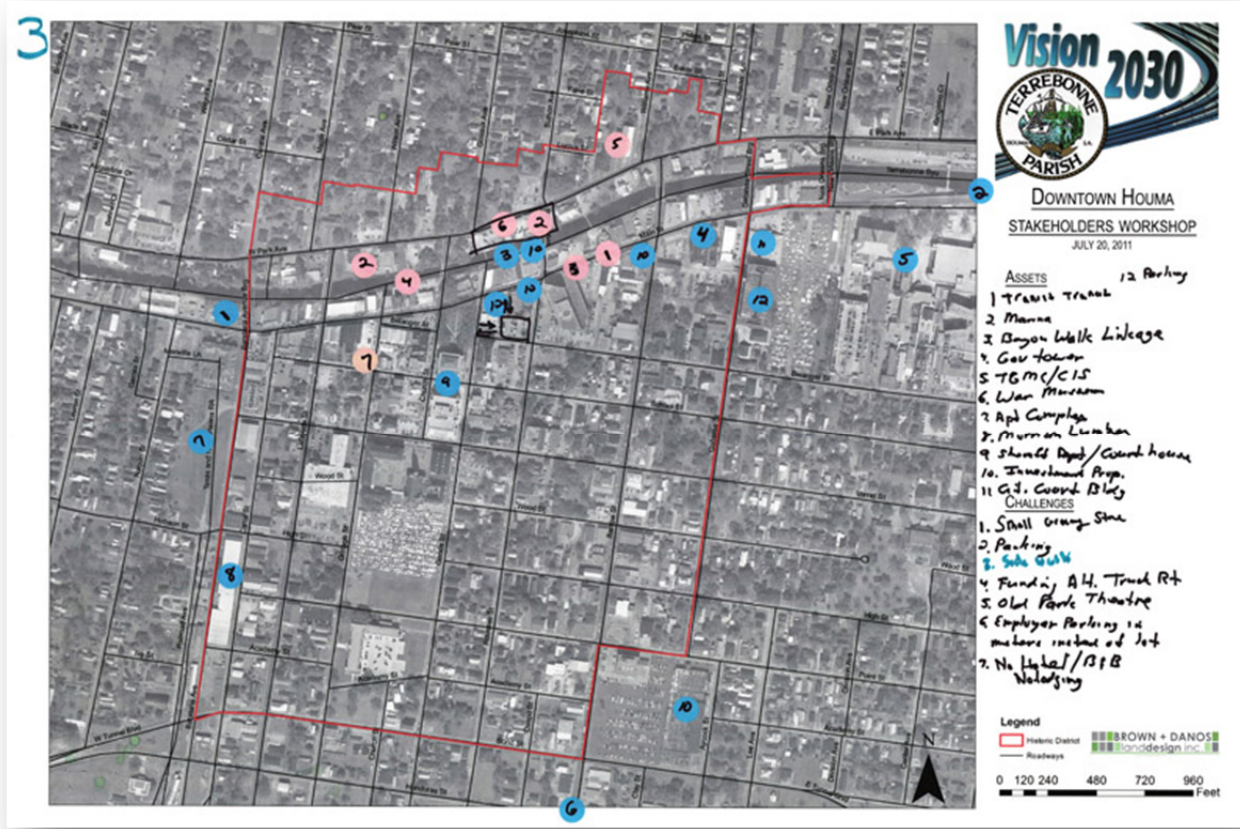
- ① Lack of green space
- ② Need change to street and sidewalk
- ③ Need more pedestrian paths
- ④ Need more landscaping - flowers, trees, etc.

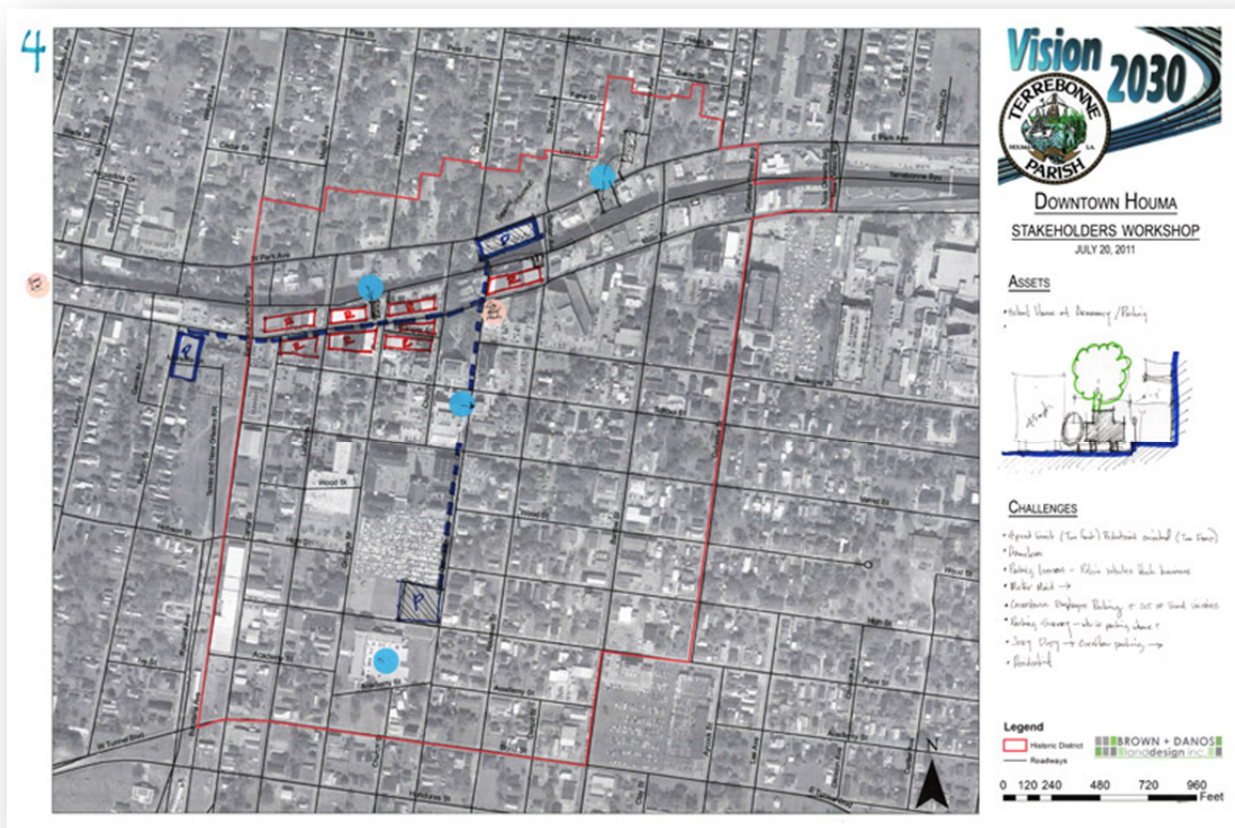
Legend

- Historic District
- Roadways
- ROWN + DANOS
- landesign, inc.

0 120 240 480 720 960 Feet







Analysis

The amount of feedback received from the workshops was substantial as plenty of data points, comments, suggestions, and problems were voiced. Much of the input from the assets and challenges was fairly consistent as a whole, offering a clear idea of what is needed to achieve the vision for the future of downtown Houma. Bayou Terrebonne itself in Downtown Houma was one particular repeated topic. It is evident that the waterway has not reached its full potential as an attraction and amenity. Several issues dealt with the quality of the area's natural systems as well as ease of access. Connections across the Bayou were encouraged, but these same connections also hindered water transportation, a complaint commonly brought forth. The Bayou Walk, a pedestrian corridor featuring outdoor spaces, trails, connectivity to downtown, and an introduction for tourists for the true Houma-Bayou experience, was well received and is identified as a strong asset. Support for the Bayou and embracing it as part of downtown was strong and clear. The only negative feedback regarding The Bayou Walk was that it does not encompass the entire east-west extent of downtown. Connections to the Downtown Houma Marina were strongly supported as it was also viewed as an important asset of downtown.

Many issues were brought up regarding Main Street. Challenges regarding traffic and large trucks were consistently raised. Various comments dealt with the need to enliven Main Street. Several challenges brought forth featured the lack of streetscape features in downtown, particularly on Main Street. Accessibility and emphasizing the need to create a pedestrian friendly atmosphere for the entire downtown area was important to the residents. Biking was also a topic of interest during the workshops. The lack of shopping and restaurants in this area was also identified, and this idea further fuels the need to enliven Main Street. Mention of improving building facades and restoring historical

buildings would take advantage of vacancies in downtown Houma. Unused land was often identified as an asset. Possibilities for development of this land include groceries stores, fresh markets, hotels, and bed and breakfast establishments.

Many expressed the lack of physical cultural elements, referring to signage, wayfinding, sculpture, murals, and overall downtown identity. The Folklife Culture Center, Regional Military Museum, and Waterlife Museum are all held in high regard. The majority of comments about historic buildings and architecture were positive. Emphasis on branding and character was brought forth through requests for entry beautification, walkability, and destination gateways.

The lack of parking in downtown was mentioned frequently as an issue in addition to the lack of bicycle paths and bicycle parking.

Based on these findings and public input, a series of goals and objectives supporting the overall vision for Downtown Houma have been formulated and are presented below. In addition, all these are supported by several strategies or actions designed to foster achievement of the stated goals over time. Taken together, these comprise a separate, stand-alone plan for Houma's downtown area.

DOWNTOWN HOUMA VISION STATEMENT

“By 2030, Downtown Houma will have become a desirable, safe and secure, mixed-use destination, attracting visitors, workers and shoppers to its diverse venue of businesses and shops – many of which have been established to capitalize on and promote local culture and heritage – supporting a variety of commercial and residential developments in a well-maintained, attractively landscaped, less congested, pedestrian-friendly environment.”



Goal 1 | Improve economic development

Houma's downtown area is the historic center of Terrebonne Parish. It is the place where people from the far reaches of the parish and its bayou communities would come to conduct business, whether official business at the Courthouse, or personal shopping at the many shops and business establishments which lined downtown streets. Lately, Downtown Houma has seen resurgence in adaptive reuse of some of its historic structures. After a few decades of various types of public investment in the downtown area, private investors and entrepreneurs are taking notice and investing private funds into downtown as a result. This is a very encouraging sign. Much needs to be done, however, if Downtown Houma is to regain its pre-eminence in the parish. Achievement of this goal will be a step in the right direction.

Objective: Attract retail stores downtown

To facilitate sustained revitalization of Downtown, a retail core area is recommended.

Strategy:

- Build a retail cluster in the core area of downtown.
- Promote by Chamber with data on market, buying power, and growth/job opportunities in Terrebonne Parish. The Chamber should actively recruit small retail, primarily Louisiana or nearby small specialty retail that could expand into the area from NOLA, BR, Lafayette, Texas, and Mississippi. Apparel and accessory stores, collectibles, antiques, sustainable products, art, kitchen stores with cooking classes, specialized fishing and hunting stores, cafes, coffee shops, repurposed products, consignment shops, etc.
- Promote historic tax credits for renovation in Houma Historic District.
- Provide better parking opportunities – a parking garage and overall parking plan will help.

- Offer expedited approvals and waiver of fees for new retail locating in the retail cluster area, or in any part of downtown. This will require coordination of agencies and utility companies. Parish government should take the lead in setting this up.
- Establish and enforce blight ordinances that require downtown properties be properly maintained so that unattractive "eyesores" are removed from the downtown area.

Objective: Attract new businesses and office space

Attracting new businesses and office space in Downtown Houma will result in a more competitive and economically viable business district.

Strategy:

- Build a public parking garage and develop a clear downtown parking plan that limits the amount of dedicated on-street parking, includes parking meters at low cost (initially); policy to eliminate police and city vehicles dominating on-street parking.
- Remove zoning requirements for off-street parking through special overlay districts.
- Offer expedited permit approvals and waiver of fees for new businesses and offices locating in downtown. This would be a significant incentive for those building on vacant land. This requires coordination of agencies and utility companies which would have to be set up.
- Establish and enforce blight ordinances requiring that downtown properties be properly maintained.

Objective: Provide community gathering spaces

The need for open green space was a suggestion frequently brought up during the public outreach process. This can come in the form of parks, plazas, gardens, and trails.



Strategy:

- Create plazas on the east and west sides of Court Square to allow for larger events to spill over, with possible temporary street closures for adequate space as it will physically tie into the future parking garage to alleviate the parking for events.
- Create additional plaza connections from Main Street to the proposed Bayou Walk, on either side of Court Square, and on either side of the proposed parking garage. Some of these plazas could be parking lots by day and outdoor event venues by night and further become part of the Bayou Walk.
- Community gardens will also serve a purpose in downtown Houma. A community garden will allow produce to be grow locally and sold to neighboring restaurants, activate the streets near the school, educate the youth about earth sciences and sustainable practices, and give a sense of presence while connecting the surrounding families.



Outreach also brought forth the need for embracing and showcasing Bayou Terrebonne, not only as a physical asset but a historically important element in the development of Houma. Additional plaza connections from Main Street to the Bayou will provide beatification and visitor access along a future walkable Main Street. Areas would connect the existing Bayou Walk plans and future Bayou Walk expansions ultimately expanding a safe pedestrian network.

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Objective: Take care of existing community and neighbors

As a means to nurture the existing residential communities in Downtown Houma, it is important to have regulations controlling the built environment that enhance the neighborhood.

Strategy:

- Repair and maintain streets, sidewalks, and street trees in the downtown residential neighborhoods.
- Establish and enforce blight ordinances requiring that downtown properties be properly maintained.

Goal 2 | Increase the number of people living downtown

Objective: Provide a range of housing for all income levels

Strategy:

- Monitor housing stock and costs in downtown to

identify potentially problematic trends.

- Seek development of workforce housing to be affordable for teachers, police, and firefighters, etc. of Terrebonne Parish.

Objective: Provide support services for local residents.

Support services located within the retail core will allow for downtown to be self-sustainable.

Through the public outreach process the residents frequently commented on the lack of a grocery nearby forcing residents to travel out to Martin Luther King Blvd., or other areas of the parish.

Strategy:

- Seek development of a medium sized/neighborhood scale grocery store around 12,000-15,000 square feet.
- Locate support services so they can easily serve downtown within walking distance.

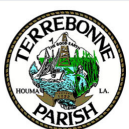
A medium sized neighborhood scale grocery store around 12,000-15,000 square feet will sufficiently serve the local families. The master plan designates an area just west of the downtown area adjacent to the assisted living facility and new housing developments easily serving half of downtown in a quarter mile radius well within walking distance.

Objective: Promote development of mixed-use buildings.

Mixed use buildings within downtown Houma will allow for both residential growth and business opportunities.

Strategy:

- Create mixed use buildings with commercial/retail on the first floor and residences on the second floor.



Mixed use buildings within downtown Houma will allow for both residential growth and business opportunities. Mixed use structures with commercial on the first floor and residences on the second will help restore density and enliven downtown. Residential density within the area is crucial for adequate support of new businesses downtown.

Objective: Provide better connectivity with the schools that are near the downtown area



Creating safe, walkable streets, with street trees and biking lanes to and from schools encourages pedestrian use. This activates the streets, allows children to safely walk or bike home, and lessens the burden on vehicular use. The nearby community garden will bring more neighbors together and put more eyes on the streets. The master plan emphasizes Goode Street and Point Street as part of key pedestrian routes to top priority.

Strategy:

- Modify zoning and building codes as needed to promote mixed uses within buildings in downtown area.
- Actively promote artists to have galleries, shops, and/or studios on first floor and to live above.

Strategy:

- Create a walkable downtown by renovating key streets into Complete Streets that accommodate safe and attractive bicycle and pedestrian facilities.
- Ensure connectivity among schools, parks, community spaces, downtown core through Complete Streets network.

Goal 3 | Attract citizens and visitors

Objective: Promote Downtown Museums

Strategy:

- Extend hours of operation into evenings and open museum facilities on weekends to make them available to visitors.
- Ensure Museums are along a connected



Complete Streets network. This will promote access to each

- Enhance Museum street presence and provide information on wayfinding and signage.
- Explore the potential of a Native American Museum to celebrate the history of the United Houma Nation

Objective: Promote downtown events.

Strategy:

- Create attractive, walkable and functional spaces within downtown
- Promote concerts, markets, movie events, and art emphasizing a core pedestrian area, as per the master plan.
- Transform Belanger Street into an open pedestrian destination with its new parking hub and supporting plazas.
- Incorporate new signage, banners, and public art into this area with the ability to showcase upcoming events to anyone who drives through Main Street.

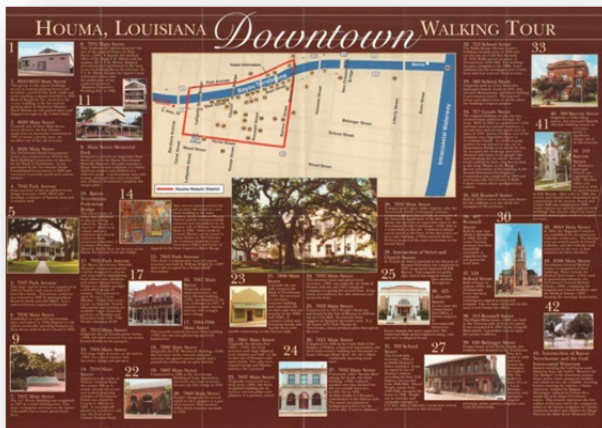
Organizing and revamping existing events to take advantage of the new space will allow more elaborate festivals and attract larger crowds. Additional space will provide for new events or possibly the consolidation of many smaller events to create a stronger impact.



Objective: Create an historic walking tour path – Houma Path

Strategy:

- Incorporate a special element, such as public art or sculpture, along the sidewalk to identify the Houma Path, connecting Courthouse Square, Museums, Bayou Walk, Marina, and other features
- To further identify and promote, incorporate Houma Path medallions at key intersections
- Provide interpretive signage at key landmarks and a smart phone application for visitors to hear and read about historic events and locations.



Goal 4 | Strengthen the character and sense of place of the downtown area

Objective: Strengthen access to the bayou



Strategy:

- Create access points

The implementation of the Bayou Walk is a step in the right direction for Downtown Houma. As access along Bayou Terrebonne is enhanced, access to the Bayou should be encouraged. The success of the revitalization of Main Street can only benefit from promoting Bayou Walk as a downtown attraction. Plazas create spaces, not only for pedestrian connections to the Bayou, but space to sit, relax, and dine by supporting businesses.

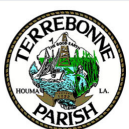
The Downtown Development Corporation should explore the feasibility of setting up a small façade grant program to assist downtown property owners situated adjacent to the Bayou Walk with rear façade improvements to their buildings.



Objective: Clean-up the bayou

Strategy:

- Promote Bayou Terrebonne Clean Up Days, and make this at least an annual event.
- Identify sewerage package plants within 2000 feet of the Bayou and begin an inspection program.
- Require repair and maintenance of these package plants.



As residents indicated during the public workshops, Bayou Terrebonne is an important feature that they would like to see become an integral part of Downtown Houma. As attention focuses on activating Main Street and the implementation of The Bayou Walk, people will be attracted to this water body. This calls for a clean, lush natural area for pedestrians to observe while they shop, eat, or even travel as many local citizens would love to see stronger access throughout the bayou from the marina. Street art, signs, and banners implemented in Downtown Houma will feature pride in strong cultural significances of the surrounding area, including Bayou Terrebonne.



Objective: Improve the sense of arrival into Downtown Houma.

Strategy:

- Create a more unified street sign and directional sign design
- Add gateway signage at the corner of Main Street and Central Ave., the median of East Park Ave. and New Orleans Blvd., and at both medians where Bond Street and Honduras Street converge.



Because Houma is located indirectly off U.S. Hwy 90, additional signage is needed to identify the City and attract visitors. These signs should be strategically located at specific Parish entry points and custom designed so that they stand out from normal state directional signs. Additionally, four recommended locations for downtown Houma are: at the corner of Main Street and Central Ave., the median of East Park Ave. and New Orleans Blvd., and at both medians where Bond Street and Honduras Street converge, as mentioned in the Strategy section above.

Objective: Improve streetscape elements.

Strategy:

- Implement streetscape standards including sidewalks, bike paths, street plantings, site furnishings, and lighting.
- Implement Complete Streets principles that will directly relate to the town's overall quality of life, attracting investors, businesses, and tourists to the area and Main Street character.

Streetscape standards recommended for certain local roads within the town limits include sidewalks, bike paths, street plantings, site furnishings, and lighting. These elements comprise a "complete street" that would create a comprehensive image, reflecting Houma's culture and character while



increasing safety and providing a more enjoyable experience for pedestrians. Implementing Complete Streets principles is also directly related to the town's overall quality of life.



Objective: Expand the Bayou Walk to extend throughout the downtown area

The Bayou Walk's extension throughout the downtown area will complement the Main Street improvements and encourage pedestrian use to cross from the north side of Bayou Terrebonne.



Strategy:

- Extend the trail from the western edge of the downtown boundary to connect to the Marina in the future, which will create nearly a mile length of trail along Bayou Terrebonne.

Extending the trail from the western edge of the downtown boundary at the Good Earth Transit Terminal to the Downtown Marina will create a pleasant trail along Bayou Terrebonne. This will attract more recreation use and businesses. Residents and consumers will have easier access to Houma businesses and nightlife along Main Street. This extension of the Bayou Walk will also facilitate access to downtown businesses by transient boaters stopping at the marina facility.

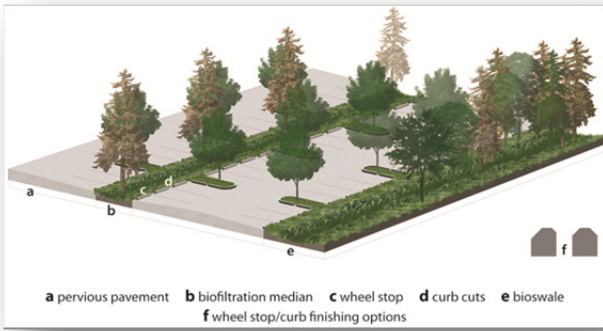
Objective: Improve downtown parking lots.

Strategy:

- Add landscaping to screen the view of vehicles to reduce the heat island effect.
- Install bioswales in parking lots to clean and filter stormwater runoff.
- Incorporate shade trees to soften the expansive amounts of barren concrete.
- Create sidewalks for pedestrians

Parking lots are scattered throughout Downtown Houma making them seemingly impossible to avoid when downtown. Some of these are at key intersections, important roadways, or highly visible areas. Many of these parking lots provide no shade, buffer, or visual relief from the massing of cars. Bioswales and planted areas in or around the lots can not only create a much more attractive area, but also clean and temporarily retain runoff from parking lots. Incorporating trees into parking lots can provide shade during the day for cars or pedestrians walking by and soften the expansive amounts of barren concrete.







Objective: Make other landscape improvements to the downtown area

The downtown area can help distinguish itself not only in the form of signage, murals, banners, and lighting, but with a cleverly designed plant palette. Plantings at intersections can help distinguish the intended pedestrian routes. Street trees can help create a hierarchy of intended vehicular networks depending on the spacing, size, and types of trees planted along these roads. Repetition of these elements helps both motorists and pedestrians navigate. These elements can further distinguish different districts by allowing each to have its own plant palette. These different palettes can support signage, lighting, and various elements that might also help distinguish different areas within the downtown boundary. Capital improvements added to Downtown Houma need to be adequately supported by annual budget appropriations for on-going maintenance.

Objective: Keep owners responsible for maintaining their property in and around vacant buildings

Character and image are important to attract tourists. Not only do these show a sense of pride, but show a sense of place. In order to attract residents and potential investors, dilapidated and unsafe property conditions must be corrected.

Strategy:

- Implement a code enforcement program to remove blighted and dilapidated buildings, abandoned vehicles, and debris.
- Implement a code enforcement program to ensure properties are maintained, improving the community's image and attracting new residents and businesses to downtown.

Rundown buildings and overgrown lots project a poor image of the downtown area. Additional code enforcement for buildings and parcels that are in dilapidated or unsafe condition will help turn around the image of the area for both existing residents and future investors.

Goal 5 | Provide universal design throughout Downtown Houma



Objective: Make downtown universally accessible.

Strategy:

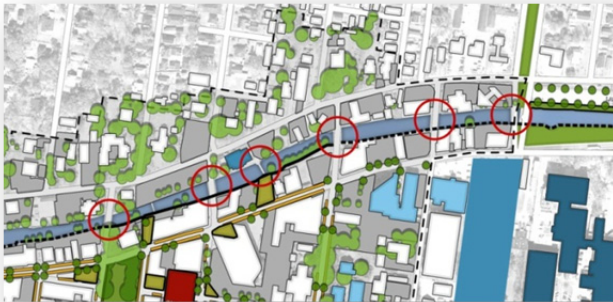
- Install ADA accessible ramps at intersections for wheelchairs and cyclists.
- Repair dilapidated sidewalks throughout downtown.
- Implement Complete Streets standards to



provide for better walkability and bikeability.

- Provide separation at intersections between pedestrians and vehicles. This includes bulb-outs, safe crosswalks, street trees, furnishings, and lighting.

Streetscape standards along designated roads need to include accessibility for the handicapped and elderly. Several key intersections throughout Downtown Houma have curbed streets creating barriers for some pedestrians and cyclists. Road improvements planned to include bulb-outs for plantings and pedestrian awareness could easily include ADA accessible ramps. These not only help for circulation, but also help to create a consistent look down Main Street.



Much like the ADA inaccessibility improvements needed at certain intersections, some areas in need of repair create barriers for some pedestrians and cyclists. These dilapidated sidewalks can make walkability more difficult, but it projects a negative image and degrades character of the surrounding areas. Any problem areas along the pedestrian/cyclist network proposed by the master plan should be the repaired first.

Walkability and bike-ability include several elements which must be addressed. The first is the accessibility issue. With the implementation of an expanded Bayou Walk trail and ADA ramp accessibility along

key intersections, users will have a decent network to use. The inclusion of Complete Street standards along crucial streets through downtown Houma will provide an optimal experience. Bike lanes along designated roadways and bike racks at key locations at plazas and civic structures will create a safe and effective alternative to driving.

Separation between pedestrians and vehicles is crucial to the success downtown walkability. Pedestrians who feel unsafe in particular areas are less likely to use them. As a result, vehicular use is preferred and congestion increases. With less pedestrian traffic, business doesn't get spontaneous pop-ins as would an active Main Street. Larger signs are needed to catch the attention of passing cars and more poles must be erected to support them. All this clutter slowly transforms what could be an attractive pedestrian space into a barren sidewalk.



Speeding traffic and large trucks can make foot traffic uneasy. This holds especially true regarding visitors. The implementation of bike police who strictly serve the downtown area allows an authoritarian presence reminding motorists to maintain limits.

The current street configuration on Main Street allows very little room for both on street parking and two lanes of traffic with 18 wheelers involved. Often these large trucks take up or cross over into both lanes creating dangers. The master plan has proposed an alternative route for large semi-trucks, eventually taking them north on Barrow Street to access the twin spans over the Gulf Intracoastal



Waterway. Before such an alternate truck route for the downtown area can be implemented, a feasibility study will be required to determine the associated costs and benefits.



Again, complete streets are an important part of any urban place. Improving key intersections with bulb-outs, providing safe crosswalks, street trees, incorporating furnishings, and provide lighting can significantly enliven and denote a sidewalk as a key space rather than having just a six inch elevation change in a continuous slab of pavement.

As with the access to Bayou Terrebonne, access to parks and open space follows the same guidelines, walkability and complete streets. Creating a safe network comprised of lighting, signage, and crosswalks encourages people to walk rather than drive and search for parking. The master plan takes additional measures by proposing plazas and pedestrian orientated areas near existing parks or highly used spaces.

