

REGIONAL COORDINATION OPPORTUNITIES AND POLICIES

In a growing region comprised of three parishes (Terrebonne, Lafourche, and Assumption) with a combined population of nearly 232,000, opportunities for regional cooperation to address common problems are present. When this region is expanded on the basis of economic and other considerations to include the River Parishes (St. John, St. James, and St. Charles), the population base grows considerably (352,405), as do opportunities for taking a regional approach to common concerns and problems.

Terrebonne accounts for nearly 32% of the population of the 6-parish region. It serves as a regional retail hub, as well as a major employment and medical services center, attracting people from nearby parishes. The tri-parish area (Terrebonne, Lafourche, and Assumption) accounts for more than 65% of the population of the expanded, 6-parish region. Within this 6-parish region are six incorporated municipalities which have to deal with many of the same problems and issues impacting the entire region.

All of these entities are members of a regional organization, South Central Planning and Development Commission (SCPDC), which provides its members with a forum to discuss and build consensus on approaches to common issues and concerns. It would appear, therefore, that would be the most logical venue to continue focused discussions pertaining to issues which may lend themselves to coordinated regional solutions. South Central Planning and Development Commission provides a number of services to its members under five general headings. These include: building code enforcement; economic development; transportation planning; information technology; and planning and community services. More important than the services SCPDC provides to its members, is

its ability to provide an appropriate forum for discussion among its members about common concerns.

The Board of Commissioners of SCPDC meets publicly on a regular basis to handle items on its agenda. In a less formal, yet still public setting, the Board along with all member parishes and municipalities could meet first to agree on regional issues and concerns to be more thoroughly discussed and then set up a framework to pursue resolution to these issues. For example, a committee comprised of SCPDC members (and other interested parties) could be appointed to look at each issue and, charged with a timeframe to report back to the Commission, develop all aspects of the problem along with potential solutions from a regional perspective.

A regional perspective is important because many quality of life and planning issues transcend individual jurisdictional boundaries. While most regions are fragmented into multiple local jurisdictions including parishes, cities, towns and other municipalities, many of which have their own local planning autonomy, there are many issues that can only be effectively addressed regionally. For example, air quality, traffic, storm water management, water quality, and natural environmental systems recognize no man-made political boundaries.

Many of the local issues which might lend themselves to regional solutions are similar to those faced by other jurisdictions elsewhere. For example, drinking water source and treatment, wastewater treatment, solid waste disposal, environmental issues (air and water quality, as mentioned above), and regional transit are issues that are being considered on a regional basis in many parts of the state. Locally, hurricane evacuation needs transcend parish boundaries, particularly in coastal Louisiana. Although Terrebonne may wish to study these issues from its perspective—and it should—the opportunity



exists is look for solutions on a regional basis. Terrebonne is impacted by air and water quality issues not necessarily of its own making. On the other hand, because it is a major retail/shopping and employment hub for the region, the traffic and transportation issues these raise impact surrounding parishes. The point is that issues or problems, despite attempts to deal with them locally, can cross jurisdictional boundaries, causing that jurisdiction to attempt to find solutions to problems not of its making.

Regional solutions hold the promise of economies of scale, cheaper and/or more stable user fees due to an expanded base, a more efficient and better service for the customer/user, and possibly, a better quality of life.

In dealing with planning issues, local jurisdictions tend to act in what they perceive to be their own best interest. Often lost sight of is how local decisions fit into the regional picture or affect other communities. Around the country, efforts to plan regionally fall into four broad categories:

- **Regional Government.** There are a number of instances around the country where cities and counties have consolidated to create a unified, multi-jurisdictional approach to governance, including planning. For example, Lexington-Fayette County (Kentucky), Indianapolis-Marion County (Indiana), and Nashville-Davidson County (Tennessee) are examples of city/county consolidations which have enabled these areas to approach planning issues from a more regional perspective. Of course, this assumes that regions can be equated with counties (or parishes), which is not necessarily true.
- **Regional Planning Agencies.** There is a wide range of multi-purpose, multi-jurisdictional regional planning agencies. In many places

they are called regional councils of government, in others, regional planning (or planning and development) commissions. Typically, these bodies act in an advisory capacity and do not have land use decision-making authority. Regional planning agencies are usually comprised of members appointed by their respective local governing bodies, and are supported by a mix of technical and citizen committees and by staff. Some function as the official Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) with responsibility for transportation planning for their respective regions. Locally, South Central Planning and Development Commission is the officially designated MPO for that part of the region which falls within the urbanized area.

- **Specialized Functional Agencies.** There are many regional agencies that have functional responsibilities related to specific aspects of regional planning and development. Most frequently, these agencies deal with regional infrastructure, such as highways, parks and open space, sanitary sewers, storm water management, and water systems. For example, the East Bay Regional Park District (covering the east side of San Francisco Bay) and the Metropolitan Sewer District in Cincinnati respectively provide park and sewer planning on a regional basis. In this region, the Bayou Lafourche Fresh Water District could be considered a specialized functional agency with a regional mission.
- **"Ad Hoc" Regional Organizations.** A growing number of regional initiatives have occurred through a diverse mix of public, quasi-public, and private organizations led by individuals or groups seeking to fill what they perceive to be gaps in government-led efforts. Some of these organizations focus primarily on growth, housing, and economic development



issues, while others are oriented towards natural resource and quality of life issues.

Some of these organizations could play a role in developing solutions to regional concerns in this area.

The purpose of this section of the Comprehensive Plan Update is to suggest areas where a regional approach to problem solving, an approach which requires regional cooperation, will produce benefits which accrue to all. But, this section intended to “solve” the identified regional concerns and issues. It will merely identify some areas that are ripe for discussion in a regional context and attempt to flesh out some of the issues associated with these areas and concerns which should be part of the discussion.

1. Air Quality

This issue has been discussed elsewhere in this document. There is little doubt, however, that air quality as it relates to Terrebonne is a sustainability issue. It is, also, a regional issue given the way air quality is monitored locally—the monitoring station is located in Lafourche Parish—and the manner in which the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality has defined the region. If the monitoring station in Lafourche Parish shows that the ozone level in our air is below the established standard, then all parishes in this region, not just Lafourche, are deemed to fall into the non-attainment status for ozone. Should this happen, and it could when the new ozone standard is promulgated by the Environmental Protection Agency, all parishes in the region would have to take steps to lower ozone levels within the allotted timeframe, or face some challenging alternatives. Depending on how far below the standard the region falls, the actions to be taken to get back into conformity could include a combination of the following, all of which are discussed in greater detail in the

Environmental chapter:

Expected Requirements for Marginal Ozone Non-Attainment

1. Emissions inventory to identify sources and quantities for Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC) and/or Nitrous Oxide (NOx) in tons per year (TPY).
2. Imposition of methods to reduce either VOC/NOx from major sources by 100TPY
3. Introduction of New Source Review (see text of Environmental section for more details)
4. Conformity determination, which could limit the region's ability to build or expand highway capacity.

All of these requirements will necessitate the parishes in the region taking action, such as voluntary measures and Ozone Action Day measures, to reduce ozone. Should the regional status for ozone fall below marginal non-attainment, additional requirements will be imposed. It would be wise, therefore, to have discussed the possibility of ozone non-attainment status for the region and develop a plan to tackle the problem on a regional basis. This plan would include budgets, timelines, and actions steps, and develop a public outreach/educational effort since citizens could be impacted directly by these requirements. Since a great deal of the efforts to reduce ozone is focused on transportation-related areas, the best setting to begin the discussion, with Terrebonne's insistence, leadership, and active participation, is South Central Planning and Development Commission.

2. Water Quality

Terrebonne Parish and the other parishes in the region have approved by resolution the *Comprehensive Conservation and Management*



Plan (CCMP) produced under the auspices of the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP) in 1996. This plan was driven by requirements of Section 320 of the Clean Water Act (CWA). The National Estuary Program (NEP), under which BTNEP functions, was created by Congress through Section 320 of CWA in 1987. This program is administered by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The goal of NEP is the prevention of activities that:

- 1) threaten the estuary's public water supply;
- 2) are harmful to shellfish, fish, and wildlife populations, and,
- 3) negatively impact recreational opportunities for estuary residents. These are objectives with regional impact. In addition, all of these objectives address the region's long-term sustainability.

The CCMP is meant to serve as guidance for the preservation and restoration efforts throughout the Barataria-Terrebonne estuary. In the CCMP's Action Plan, Ecological Management (EM) as it pertains to Water Quality is one of the plan's stated objectives. At least three of the actions under this objective are directly relevant to the sustainability of Terrebonne and the region, as well as its waterways and estuarine system. These actions are the reduction of sewage pollution, the reduction of agricultural pollution, and storm water management.

These actions are designed to improve water quality in the region and, as such, are directly related to the region's long-term sustainability.

Terrebonne Parish should renew its commitment to work and become an active partner with BTNEP (an "ad hoc" regional agency) and the other parishes in the region (in the Barataria-

Terrebonne estuary system) to attain the goals and objectives which may not yet be attained, or, to develop new goals and objectives in keeping with the overall objectives of the CCMP and Section 320 of the Clean Water Act. Clean drinking water, healthy fish and wildlife populations, and first-class recreational opportunities are of primary importance for regional sustainability and economic development.

3. Wastewater Treatment

How wastewater is treated (or not treated in some cases) has a direct impact on the region's clean water, as discussed above. In addition, untreated or partially treated effluent can infiltrate into surface water during flooding conditions, for example, and the contaminated water can sheet flow across parish lines, or find its way into streams which cross parish lines. Under these conditions, standing water in roadside ditches are contaminated with effluent and such contamination in streams and bayous contribute to the impairment of water bodies in our region. The elimination or least the reduction of sewage pollution is one of the three actions in BTNEP's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan designed to improve overall water quality in the region for drinking, for support of wildlife, fish, and shellfish, and for recreational purposes.

There may be opportunities to provide community sewerage across parish or municipal boundaries at least at the edges where such infrastructure does not currently exist. For example, it may be possible to connect areas of north Terrebonne Parish to the community sewage treatment capabilities in the City of Thibodaux in Lafourche Parish. These options should be explored and Terrebonne Parish could take a leading role in this. Logically, South Central



Planning and Development Commission would be the agency to facilitate these discussions which would explore feasibility from all aspects including financial considerations. The region and its overall water quality would be better served by fewer individual and community package sewage treatment plants and an expanded regional wastewater treatment system.

4. Potable Water

This area is already taking on regional significance as the discussion around Terrebonne's possible election to join the Bayou Lafourche Fresh Water District (BLFWD) intensifies. All or parts of four parishes (West Ascension, Assumption, Lafourche, and Terrebonne) currently draw fresh raw water from Bayou Lafourche. In Terrebonne's case, most of its raw water supply is drawn indirectly from Bayou Lafourche through the Lafort Canal, but the source is Bayou Lafourche under a 40-year agreement with BLFWD which expires in 2014. The other raw water source currently available to Terrebonne Parish is the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW), and Bayou Black when salinity levels in the GIWW exceed 250 ppm. Unfortunately, this salinity level is not an uncommon occurrence in the GIWW and the Bayou Black alternate source is acceptable, but not preferable. The ultimate issue for Terrebonne, therefore, is not whether it will continue to draw most of its drinking water from Bayou Lafourche after 2014, but how much Terrebonne Parish consumers will ultimately pay for drinking water.

The condition and health of Bayou Lafourche is of great concern, obviously, to Terrebonne Parish and its residents, as well as all the other parishes which are members of the Bayou Lafourche Fresh Water District. For this reason, the BLFWD undertakes improvements to this water body to ensure its sustainability and the quality of its

water. Member parishes tax themselves through a property tax millage dedicated to the operations of the District and pay a fixed rate for water usage which can only be raised by approval of the Board of Commissioners of the District. Currently, Terrebonne is not a member of the BLFWD and has no seat on the District's governing board. Consequently, Terrebonne has no say in the policies and decisions of this board at this time, although state enabling legislation has been passed to allow Terrebonne to join the BLFWD and have seats on its governing board. Since this probably hinges around a discussion of the costs involved for the water uses in Terrebonne Parish, TPCG in conjunction with Consolidated Waterworks District No. 1 should take the lead in bringing other interested parties to the table to thoroughly discuss the issues, and propose the matter to the voters of the parish, if it so decides.

5. Solid Waste Disposal

Currently, there are no landfills in Terrebonne parish receiving solid waste. Green waste and other recyclables are received at the landfill, but solid waste is picked up curbside and brought to a parish-operated transfer facility at the Ashland landfill site. From there, solid waste is trucked to a landfill facility (River Birch) on the west back of St. Charles Parish near the Jefferson Parish line.

Most of the parishes in the region are in this same situation relative to solid waste disposal. For this reason, there are opportunities to come together to determine the practicality and feasibility of establishing a consolidated contract with not only the garbage haulers, but with the regional landfill itself. The result could be lower costs for the consumers in each of the participating parishes.

To that end, some type of regional solid waste



authority was established several years ago. However, little progress has been made in defining and pursuing regional goals relative to solid waste disposal, both in transportation/hauling contracts and tipping fees at the landfill site. At one time, the potential existed to develop another regional landfill in Assumption Parish. Although the site held promise and planning actually progressed to the permitting phase, local opposition was sufficient to stop the project indefinitely.

South Central Planning and Development Commission could take the lead in bringing all the regional governments and municipalities with either escalating solid waste costs or other solid waste disposal problems to the table for meaningful discussion about these problems. Terrebonne, as the parish with the region's largest population, has a very good reason to work with SCPDC to find lower cost options for solid waste disposal and transport which can be implemented at some point in the future.

6. Regional Transit

With Terrebonne's Good Earth Transit system extending to Nicholls State University (NSU) in Thibodaux, and now expanded via a downtown loop, and the River Parishes Transit System fully operational, most of the elements for a regional transit system are now in place. With these systems in operation now, an opportunity exists to link together a regional system allowing travel by public transportation from Terrebonne to metro New Orleans and back. Obviously, such a system will require considerable study, but a great deal of the structure is already in place, not only in this region, but in Jefferson and Orleans Parishes as well. What is needed is a mechanism to interface all adjacent transit systems at their edges in order to allow someone in St. James Parish, for example, to travel via transit to

Houma-Terrebonne, or NSU, or to metro New Orleans, and back.

Transportation and transit in particular, is an important element of affordable housing and an affordable housing strategy. In order to achieve a truly affordable housing objective, transportation, housing, and employment opportunities/centers must work together to support each other. These elements form a triad which can contribute greatly to housing affordability. A regional transit system will play an important role in this strategy.

7. Hurricane Evacuation

Adequate and all-weather roads and highways for hurricane evacuation are a necessity for Terrebonne Parish, indeed for all of coastal Louisiana. For Terrebonne, hurricane evacuation is a need with regional impacts and, therefore, should be handled on a regional basis. Possibly, SCPDC could be the agency responsible for coordination, but with Terrebonne's leadership and active participation. The stream of evacuating traffic will most definitely cross parish lines. In some ways, this is a "super" regional issue requiring a great deal of cooperation and planning at the state agency level.

Although state agencies have been involved in planning for hurricane evacuation locally, via U.S. 90 for example, more needs to be done in terms of the infrastructure of hurricane evacuation routes. Unless Terrebonne residents leave several days in advance of the storm's immediate approach, U.S. 90 and the local state roads which lead to it and which funnel bayou community residents to it, soon become clogged with traffic. While U.S. 90 eventually turns in a northerly direction in St. Mary Parish, it is within 30 miles of the Vermilion Bay and the Gulf of Mexico—and still vulnerable to storms—when it reaches



Lafayette, LA. With heavy traffic flowing west from parishes to the east of Terrebonne and possibly from metro New Orleans, depending on the storm's track, last minute evacuation from Terrebonne Parish is extremely difficult.

What Terrebonne needs is a good north-south hurricane evacuation route and such a route has been in the planning stages for several years now. It is referred to as the Houma-Thibodaux to LA 3127 Connection EIS Project (SPN 700-99-0302; FAP No. HP-9902(518)). However, the completion of this roadway has been seriously delayed by environmental and other concerns which are not necessarily in the best interests of the people living in this region. The completion of this route, regardless of the alignment, will allow faster access to U.S. 61 for evacuation north, and to I-10 for evacuation to the west (or east, as the case may be) for connections to other high speed highway facilities leading north.

The EIS is studying a number of alignments, all with beginning points at U.S. 90 in Terrebonne Parish and ending at the LA 3127/LA 3212 intersection in St. John the Baptist Parish. LA 3212 provides direct access to the Gramercy-Wallace Bridge over the Mississippi River, and once across to U.S. 61 and I-10. Once I-10 is reached, access to I-55 North is facilitated. The Central Alignment begins at the U.S. 90/LA 316 intersection in Terrebonne Parish and, after bypassing Thibodaux, reconnects with LA 20 between Chackbay and South Vacherie. This alignment may be the least complicated of the alignments studied and the shortest, most direct route.

The Western Alignment Begins at the U.S. 90/LA 311 intersection and bypasses most of the City of Thibodaux to the west, eventually connecting to LA 20 north of Thibodaux and south of Chackbay. This alignment is longer than the Central

Alignment.

The Constrains Alignment actually proposes three alignments, each with variations. One of these alignments cuts through Thibodaux, while the other two bypass the city, one on its eastern side and one on its west. Above the City of Thibodaux, the Constrains Alignment shows more variation, some utilizing existing roads, others not.

A final alignment, although it is referred to simply as the "Northern Section," refers to possible variations in the LA 20 alignment as it approaches LA 3127. Two possibilities are provided.

Terrebonne Parish, in conjunction with SCPDC, should push to have the EIS completed and an alignment selected to that this needed and important roadway project can proceed. Terrebonne Parish and the region need to have a viable alternative for hurricane evacuation. This roadway project is the answer.

