SMART GROWTH
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
A project of Smart Growth America

CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

About the Community

Situated along the Mississippi River in southeastern Louisiana, Baton Rouge is both the state capitol and the seat of East Baton Rouge Parish. The older portions of Baton Rouge are redolent with Southern charm and a distinctive architectural character, but both are missing in the newer portions of the city, which have followed suburban development standards typical of the eras in which they were built.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Baton Rouge became the largest city in Louisiana with perhaps as many as 200,000 people migrating to the Greater Baton Rouge area as a result of the storm. The Louisiana Population Data Center (LPDC) estimates the current (2007) population of East Baton Rouge Parish at approximately 412,852. Even with the influx of people following Katrina, this is substantially less that the 2005 population projection of 428,010 LPDC had made earlier. The Center's projection for 2010 (made prior to 2005) was 445,160 people. Since the region is recovering relatively slowly from the economic effects of Katrina, it is unlikely that the projection will be met.

State Of Smart Growth Implementation

While the City/Parish's comprehensive planning document —*the Horizon Plan*— contained many policies that were supportive of smart growth principles, the community's Unified Development Code (UDC) did not facilitate smart growth oriented projects.

The Horizon Plan was largely the result of a grass roots movement, while the UDC was the product of numerous incremental amendments and revisions. No concerted effort had been made after the adoption of the Horizon Plan to bring the UDC into line with the policies contained in the vision document.

The City had a major planning success with its downtown plan. That effort to forge a vision and bring it to fruition was spearheaded by the Plan Baton Rouge (PBR). Community leaders who had been involved in that effort were anxious to tackle the issue of facilitating smart growth development in the wider community.

PBR was successful in recruiting support from the Mayor and several other members of the City/Parish Council. They had the support of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, other civic and business leaders, including developers in this effort.

Plan Baton Rouge and the City/Parish applied for assistance in response to anticipated growth and growing traffic congestion problems because they saw the benefit of having a development code that supported the smart growth principles found in the Horizon Plan. The technical assistance team was asked to review the Horizon Plan and the Unified Development Code for consistency.

Opposition to smart growth came from two directions. Though there are fairly high-density areas in the downtown core of Baton Rouge, residents of outlying neighborhoods were not supportive of increasing densities in suburban areas. There was widespread opposition to requiring connectivity between neighborhoods.

The SGLI Technical Assistance team audited the Baton Rouge Horizon Plan and the Unified Development Code and evaluated the state of smart growth implementation in Baton Rouge. Among the key findings and recommendations from the audits were:

- *The lack of street connectivity that was exacerbating congestion in Baton Rouge by forcing all traffic onto a limited number of arterial corridors.*

  Requiring connectivity in new developments and rebuilding it in older neighborhoods is important not only to relieve congestion but to offer alternative routes for evacuation in emergencies. Careful consideration of design will limit the volume and speed of traffic so that neighborhoods are not adversely impacted. Through traffic would still be directed to the arterials but there would be more options for accessing them, which would help to alleviate the current choke points.

- *The boundaries between commercial and residential areas tended to be very abrupt, setting the stage for use conflicts.*

  Development of a TND overlay district would permit appropriate development in transition zones between heavily commercial areas and residential neighborhoods.

- *There was very little variation in the size or configuration of houses in any given neighborhood and this lead to stratification on a number of levels.*

  Changing codes to permit variation in lot size and housing type within zones would permit people to stay in their neighborhoods as their housing needs change with age and family status.

- *Despite the presence of sidewalks, few areas in the city/parish were pedestrian friendly.*

  Revised street designs to accommodate more amenities such as wider sidewalks, medians, crosswalks, transit stops and bicycle lanes will encourage the use of alternative modes and increase pedestrian and bicyclist safety.

Lessons Learned

Be Politically Savvy, Spot and Leverage the Opportunities

Politically savvy leaders in the community are invaluable in maintaining the momentum of a smart growth implementation. In addition to keeping the issue in front of the community, adept leaders can recognize the opportune moments to:

Lower institutional barriers – retirement of key officials opens the door for restructuring departments and allowing more integrated planning to occur; and

Lower resistance to change – using relevant local events or circumstances to illustrate the advantages to be gained from adopting new development patterns.

Watch Your Language

In Baton Rouge, as in other case studies, it was also quite apparent that semantics count. Particularly in those areas where private property rights are of paramount concern, resistance to incorporating smart growth principles is reduced when proposed changes are couched in palatable language and hot button words are avoided. Strong economic arguments for smart growth are needed in politically and fiscally conservative areas to overcome resistance to compact development patterns and increased density.

Local foundations are invaluable

Local foundations interested in the health and vitality of the community are indispensable partners and leaders. The Baton Rouge Area Foundation is a commanding force for change in Baton Rouge.

Postscript

Since its release, SGLI's technical assistance report has been used extensively both as a reference document in revising codes and as a symbol of positive change. It played a prominent role in a recent campaign for a bond measure that will fund street improvements that follow smart growth development patterns. One official characterized the audit as, "the best thing to happen for planning in Baton Rouge/East Baton Rouge Parish."

New projects that incorporate the TND and mixed-housing type recommendations are being developed. Plans are being drafted for the conversion of several commercial strip areas to mixed-use districts designed to both serve neighborhood commercial needs and to act as transition areas between the busier commercial and neighboring residential districts. Streetscape improvements in these areas will bring the streets back to human scale.

While acceptance of the recommendations related to sidewalks, bike lanes and pedestrian amenities is strong, calls for street connectivity are still met with stubborn resistance even after the object lessons taught by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita about the need for multiple evacuation route options.

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About the Case Studies

Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.

The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with its implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.

*Visit **www.sgli.org** for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.*

*Visit **www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net** for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.*