

# URBAN DESIGN



## Background

Baton Rouge, like most communities in America, coordinates development through zoning regulations which separate uses of land into separate zones with specific activities permitted within each zone. These local laws grew out of

the social reform and public health movements at the turn of the 20th century with the intention of protecting public health and safety from unsafe and overcrowded living conditions common at the time. By defining allowable property uses and thus constraining the intrusion of incompatible activities into residential and other areas, zoning laws have also proven useful as a means of protecting private property investment.

However, simply zoning individual parcels has proven to be inadequate for building livable communities and many communities have adopted comprehensive plans to coordinate growth and development in their areas. The citizens of East Baton Rouge Parish recognized this inadequacy and in 1992, adopted the Horizon Plan as the comprehensive land use and development plan the Parish. The Horizon Plan reflects our community's consensus of goals and objectives that maintain and promote a high quality of life for its citizens.

## Urban Design and the Horizon Plan

In particular, specific goals and objectives in the Horizon Plan provide for protection and enhancement of the character of existing business, commercial and residential areas, as well as the visual and aesthetic character of the Parish. Neighborhoods are recognized building blocks of the community and many Action Items or strategies in the Horizon Plan call for citizen participation in order to maintain or establish neighborhood identity.

In recent years, many communities have looked at ways to address quality of life issues which together create a viable and livable community. Urban design has great potential for enhancing the visual image and quality of neighborhoods. Urban design standards promoting excellence in development through architectural design and landscaping can create or renew a sense of local pride and identity. Urban design can increase property values. Baton Rouge, through the implementation of the Horizon Plan has taken some bold steps to preserve and enhance the appearance of the community. These steps include the adoption of sign and landscape ordinances.

The Horizon Plan addresses these concerns that public and private development can improve the character of existing neighborhoods and enhance the sense of neighborhood identity. Urban design issues can be found in almost one-third of the Action Items of the Horizon Plan. There are 74 Action Items which call for specific activities relating to an Urban Design Program: 25 in the Land Use Element, 18 in the Transportation Element, two in the Wastewater, Solid Waste and Drainage Element, seven in the Conservation and Environmental Resources Element, 10 in the Recreation and Open Space Element, three in the Housing Element, and nine in the Public Services, Public Buildings, and Health and Human Services Element.

## Urban Design Guidelines

Neighborhoods, districts, corridors, and special use areas are, in part, defined by their identifiable and memorable centers and edges. The image of gateways, natural and physical features, and transportation corridors can define the perception of a place. Physical design can help establish vitality in centers of activity by grouping public services, retail establishments and other amenities around a neighborhood focal point with a distinguishable identity.

An Urban Design Program providing guidelines for development activity in clearly defined special design areas, or design districts, can strengthen the physical and economic character of each neighborhood by mitigating or avoiding functional and architectural incompatibility of buildings or services. These design districts include Growth Centers, major transportation corridors, historic districts and other unique community areas as identified in the Horizon Plan.

## Implementation of Urban Design Guidelines

Design guidelines are a voluntary supplement to general zoning regulations, designed to provide a framework for the protection and enhancement of the aesthetic, economic and environmental quality of the Parish by addressing development issues as related to neighborhood character and economic diversity.

The Horizon Plan places special emphasis upon the implementation of a Subarea/Neighborhood Planning Process as a means of encouraging citizen participation in the planning of their neighborhoods including the identification and enhancement of quality of life issues and aesthetics that create a sense of place.

## Growth Centers

Initiated in 1998 and completed in 2007, the Subarea/ Neighborhood Planning Process includes an urban design component which identifies the characteristic elements of the Parish's Growth Centers (see Information Bulletin 12, "Subarea/ Neighborhood Planning Initiated in 1998" for more details of this process). The Horizon Plan identifies Growth Centers as areas of focused growth and development, appropriate for mixed use and providing services to the local or regional neighborhood. These Growth Centers are characterized by opportunities for a mix of activities for people to live, work and play, while forming a town center for retail and services for adjacent neighborhoods.

Growth Centers should each have a unique identity and character, reinforced through unifying urban design and development standards for characteristics such as signage, setbacks, landscaping and other elements that enhance the visual quality of the centers. Most neighborhoods have one or more Growth Centers within their vicinity. The itemized Growth Center image characteristics were presented at the Subarea/ Neighborhood Planning meetings in part to stimulate neighbors to discuss among themselves what identity their neighborhood Growth Centers should promote.

## Urban Design in East Baton Rouge Parish

Many Horizon Plan Action Items promote the designation of urban design districts or corridors where unique urban design guidelines may be implemented, such as the Downtown area, Airline Highway, Florida Boulevard, Government Street, the Riverfront, Spanish Town and Beauregard Town. In Baton Rouge, several neighborhood and/or business associations have cooperated to enhance their image utilizing urban design.

Efforts of Plan Baton Rouge and others to revitalize the Downtown area are deeply rooted in the concepts of urban design as applied in the techniques and principles of "Smart Growth." Many of the recommendations upon which the draft master plan is based involve emphasizing the identity of individual neighborhoods within Downtown. Improving the image of the built environment by building upon the design aspects that give Downtown its special sense of place can also reinforce the functional and architectural compatibility between buildings to enhance safety and visual coherency.



In response to citizen appeal during 1998, the Metropolitan Council established a steering committee, assigning it the mission of drafting a proposal for historic district designation for Beauregard Town. This document, if approved, may provide a similar avenue for protection of Spanish Town. The heart of the developing proposal is based upon the concepts of recognizing and building upon the mixed-use, pedestrian scale and special characteristics such as architectural, spatial and landscape images that give this community its distinctive identity, recognized as worthy of preservation.

## Landscape and Urban Design



By identifying and building upon the landscaping that, in part, defines a neighborhood's image, the visual impact of natural and public areas can become a significant element in urban design. The identification and relative success of landscape elements working together, including

plantings, lighting, pedestrian and streetscape amenities, and public spaces for social interaction, determines which of the components may be strengthened to provide a stronger regional character.

Building upon the City-Parish Landscape Ordinance, Baton Rouge Green, has initiated a number of projects to enhance the landscaping in the city. Using private and public donations, this citizen action group, often with the participation of local business, has made important strides toward enhancing the character of many transportation corridors. The Florida Boulevard Merchants Association and Baton Rouge Green have teamed to landscape much of Florida Boulevard.

## Transportation and Urban Design

Urban design plays an important role in providing a safe and pleasant journey along transportation corridors. The Horizon Plan identifies several roadways especially suited for incorporating elements of streetscape design along public rights-of-way. The effectiveness of street identification signs in helping motorists find their way is well proven. Different districts can utilize signage to reinforce a sense of place to their areas. Festive street banners identifying particular regions of the central business district and the adjacent neighborhoods of Spanish and Beauregard Towns have been on display for several years. The Mid City Redevelopment Alliance has also utilized street banners. Well marked crosswalks encourage safe pedestrian circulation while instituting traffic calming measures and a sensitivity to the pedestrian and parking experience improves a community's appearance, vitality and safety.

## Program Structure

Much of the momentum for establishing and incorporating urban design must come from local, neighborhood initiative and become self sustaining through a shared understanding of the economic and social importance of a community's appearance. The Planning Commission can assist community associations in their development of a strategic urban design plan for revitalizing and protecting the quality of life in our communities.

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