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## The Land Barons

By Penny Brown Font

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A megalopolis.

That's what they're calling the phenomenon that's predicted to take hold of the 10/12 corridor sometime during the next four decades.

It's a label coined by French geographer Jean Gottmann, widely known for his seminal study on the urban region of the Boston-Washington corridor. It refers to an extensive metropolitan area or a long chain of roughly continuous metropolitan areas.

In other words, much of that land from Lake Charles to Slidell and down to New Orleans that currently looks like forest or field may eventually be swallowed up by the linear city known as the 10/12 corridor.

So who stands to benefit from that transformation? Or who, perhaps, is pushing to make it happen?

One is a high-powered lawyer who has a predilection for well-traveled interstate intersections. Another is a logging giant that doesn't mind selling off acreage if the price is right. One is a prominent urban developer whose work is worth an estimated \$800 million. And two of them have their roots in one of Louisiana's oldest cash crops—sugar cane.

Meet the land barons—five of the corridor's biggest landowners.

**Robert Bruno**

**The Northshore**

**Acreage:** 750

**Key properties:** La. 1077 and I-12 in Madisonville, 500 acres on La. 1077, 100 acres at the Robert exit on I-12

**Estimated value:** \$62 million

Robert Bruno has a thing for intersections.

The Tulane University Law School graduate—who went in the Bruno & Bruno family practice with his three brothers—always wanted to get into real estate development.

But when he moved to the Northshore from his Uptown home, it was what he calls a “light bulb moment.”

“There isn't a father who didn't drive down Airline Highway years ago and look around and say, ‘I could have bought that for \$10 way back when,’” Bruno says. “I looked around the Northshore and I saw this tremendous land opportunity, especially where the roads intersected with the interstate.”

It dawned on him to start buying up those prime corners of land.

He and his brothers formed an equal development partnership called Bruno Brothers Development Firm, with him as the managing partner.

Bruno's first real estate deals involved buying land on La. 1085 and La. 1077, which he later sold to the Catholic Church. He also took 40 acres of prime land and sold it to the Madisonville Parks & Recreation Department for \$5,000 an acre, although he's convinced it could have fetched \$60,000 to \$80,000 an acre.

With the help of **Joe Kramer at Stirling Properties**, Bruno bought the corner of La. 1077 and Interstate 12 in Madisonville and built a commercial business park along a boulevard. Hospital Corporation of America and Medline kicked off the project, building a 77,000-square-foot service facility to serve HCA-owned hospitals. He sold all 58 acres in the park in a matter of five years.



Robert Bruno

At the time he bought it, it was wide-open green space. Now there are 500 employees working there.

After that experience, Bruno formed a partnership with Mike Saucier at Gulf States Real Estate Services, whom Bruno says “taught me how to develop projects myself.” Together, the pair developed a Home Depot off the interstate in Biloxi. He's also developing a shopping center there.

Along Interstate 12, he now owns 100 acres at the Robert exit, 88 acres in South Tangipahoa Business Park and is under contract to bring an upscale apartment building in Hammond, a shopping Center in LaPlace and more than 80 acres on Airport Road.

He also owns 500 acres on La. 1077, largely because he's convinced it's St. Tammany's last remaining major artery and he wants to maintain it as an idyllic residential area. And he's negotiating with a grocery store chain to join a business park at the Carencro exit along I-12.

On 35 acres in the northwest quadrant where I-12 and U.S. 190 intersect, Bruno Brothers recently partnered with Wink Companies to build a 60,000-square-foot Class A office building. The move brought Wink—a privately owned engineering, architecture and surveying firm—to St. Tammany.

“You can't just say you're going to buy a corner and anoint it a retail corner,” Bruno says. “You've got to get a lot of input about what's going to work there.”

He worries that communities who expect developers to foot the bill for infrastructure improvements are stymieing growth along the 10/12 corridor.

“If I have to fight city hall every day, I'm not going to build there. I'm just not,” he says. “I'm being asked to solve all the drainage problems of a community just to use nine acres. That can't be put on the backs of business. This growth that everybody predicts is coming to the corridor is not going to happen by itself. It will happen in five to 10 years if the state will put in the necessary roads, water and sewer.”

### **Tommy Spinosa**

#### **Baton Rouge**

**Acreage:** Not available

**Key properties:** Perkins Rowe, Rouzan in Baton Rouge

**Estimated value:** \$800 million



JTS Interests President Tommy Spinosa

Tommy Spinosa began his career working at the family-owned Black Angus Steakhouse.

Today, he is president of JTS Interests, where he has 86 employees specializing in property acquisitions and development and construction and property management.

Since leaving the restaurant business in 1980, he has acquired or developed property valued at more than \$800 million throughout Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. He started in the residential sector, developing multi-family communities throughout South Louisiana. When the market went bad, he switched to office space and, along with GE Commercial, acquired a portfolio of nearly \$70 million.

His first attempt at retail was Baton Rouge's CitiPlace, which he dubs the city's first mixed-use development, in the 1990s.

In the summer of 2007, he sold The Gates—a 369-unit upscale apartment complex that is one of the anchors of CitiPlace—for \$41.5 million.

Spinosa is about to complete the first phase of Perkins Rowe, a 25-acre mixed development he is building on property he bought from Jimmy Swaggart. It's designed to be a small town with a town square, mid-rise condominiums, offices, movie theaters, medical offices, new restaurants and a health club. In December, he announced a deal with a five-story hotel with 160 rooms. But the project has had its share of setbacks, including a slowdown in the local residential market and a credit crunch in the national financial market, and a couple of lawsuits.

Still, the second phase is slated to begin later this year or early 2010.

He now turns his attention to Rouzan, a traditional neighborhood development with a French Creole design on a 119-acre pasture in the heart of South Baton Rouge. He paid \$15 million more than three years ago to get it, then fought with the Southside Civic Association, which aggressively opposed the necessary zoning change.

He envisions a village there, complete with residential units, retail and office space, cafes and restaurants, a library, a clapboard church, a Montessori school and 13 parks—all connected to the surrounding neighborhoods by an open street grid.

“This is such an opportunity for us,” Spinosa has said, “and for what we felt we could do for Baton Rouge.”

### **Cinclare Plantation**

#### **West Baton Rouge**

**Acreage:** 14,000

**Key properties:** A sugar cane plantation and mill listed on the National Register of Historic Places, 2,500 acres of woodlands, prime commercial property on La. 1, land along the Intercoastal Canal.

**Estimated value:** Not available

In 1878, Harry Laws and his family left Cincinnati for South Louisiana, where they bought a sugar mill on the west side of the Mississippi River. They named it Cinclare Plantation, after a bookkeeper.

In 2005—the year the federal government instituted production limits—Cinclare ground its last sugar cane, 700,000 tons of it.

The firm still leases its land for cane farming, but sold its mill equipment to Alma Plantation.

And these days, the Laws family—who own shares in Harry L. Laws & Co. and is now split into factions in Louisiana,

Memphis and Cincinnati—is looking to get into another business: Development.

The firm is engaged in long-term strategic planning to determine how to develop the property.

“Right here next to the river across from Baton Rouge is not quite an ideal place to have a sugar mill,” says CEO and President Matthew “Butch” Plauche Jr., who started as a cane factory worker in 1978 and worked his way up. “We’re being encroached upon by subdivisions and more people are moving into the area and you get more complaints from the neighbors and all that.”

Plauche says a Baton Rouge loop would open up quite a bit of the property for development. But the family also wants to preserve the rich history of the plantation as well.

“Since it’s such a historical presence in West Baton Rouge parish we’d like to keep it along those lines as a historical monument and develop around that; enhance the historical aspects of the place,” he says. “Exactly how we do that, still searching for ways.”

The economic downturn may put those plans on hold for awhile. A recent report indicated there were 3,000 lots already on the market in West Baton Rouge Parish. Plauche thinks an upscale development might fare better.

“We’re going to sit bak, do our strategic plan and, when the time is right, decide what direction to go,” Plauche says. “There’s a lot of potential here. We own 2,500 acres of woodlands, which could be used for some sort of recreation. We also own land along the Intercoastal Canal. And we have prime commercial property on Highway 1.

“Whatever we do, we just want to make sure it’s a quality development that will not decrease the value of the existing property and that the people of Brusly and WBR be proud to live next to.”



COO Roddy Hulett

### **Louisiana Green Fuels**

#### **Lake Charles**

**Acreage:** 12,000

**Key properties:** Sugar cane fields in Calcasieu, Jefferson Davis and St. James parish; sugar mills in Lacassine and Iberia and St. James parishes.

**Estimated value:** \$75 million

In the spring of 2006, the owners Louisiana Green Fuels group visited the Iberia Sugar Coop on the south side of New Iberia, with the intention of buying it, dismantling it and shipping the equipment to South America.

Instead, they ended up buying two more sugar cane processing plants, purchasing 8,000 acres of fields and leasing another 4,000 more along the 10/12 corridor, moving their families to Lake Charles and starting an alternative fuels business.

Their plan for all that property? Producing 100 million gallons a year of ethanol.

LGF now owns the Iberia Sugar Mill, the notorious Lacassine Syrup Plant [which proved to be an political debacle for former Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom] and the St. James Sugar Mill. The company is in the midst of building a sucrose-to-ethanol distillery at the Lacassine facility, which it hopes to have up and running in time for the next harvest. Two more 25-million-gallon-a-year ethanol facilities are planned.

Look for LGF to continue buying up land along the corridor—mostly for farming. COO Roddy Hulett—a South African native whose great grandfather started the sugar industry in his native country and who himself has been in the business for nearly 50 years—says the firm is “absolutely in expansion mode, and we’re going to continue in that mode.”

The land LGF has acquired is mostly rice fields no longer in production, which they are laser leveling with a slight slope to create the proper conditions for growing sugar cane or sweet sorghum.

Randal Johnson, LGF spokesman, says the firm’s work is opening up new opportunities for farmers along the 10/12 corridor.

“For so long in Louisiana, the amount of sugar cane we can grow was limited by what could be sold for food as determined by the USDA,” he says. “Cane for ethanol is outside that quota. They are free to grow as much as they can. It’s another opportunity to make money.”

The corridor was an obvious choice for such a company, given the history and abundance of sugar cane farming here and

the access to transportation, like the interstates and ports. LGF's mills are also located close to manufacturing plants and other potential customers in Louisiana, and not far from the market in Houston.



Doug Hughes & Jocelyn Wilson

### **Weyerhaeuser**

#### **Livingston & St. Tammany parishes**

**Acreage:** 18,000 along the I10/I12 corridor

**Key properties:** In Livingston Parish, from the Walker interchange on the west side of the parish to La. 43 to the east. In St. Tammany Parish, from the soon-to-be constructed interchange at La. 10088 to Airport Road.

**Estimated value:** Not available

One of the corridor's biggest landowners is a company that isn't even headquartered in Louisiana, although former LSU Chancellor Mark Emmert—now at the University of Washington—does serve on its board of directors.

Weyerhaeuser Company, one of the world's largest forest products companies, was incorporated in 1900 and is based in Federal Way, Wash. In 2007, sales were \$16.3 billion.

Throughout Louisiana, Weyerhaeuser employs 1,200 employees at eight manufacturing facilities, including a lumber mill in Holden. The firm manages or owns over 1 million acres in Louisiana with 700,000 acres in North Louisiana and the remaining balance of land located in the Florida Parishes.

The timber firm owns 10,000 of its 110,000 acres in Livingston Parish along the 10/12 corridor. And, through a long-term lease with the Poitevent family, Weyerhaeuser manages or owns 8,000 of its 66,000 acres in St. Tammany Parish along the interstate corridor. The company declined to estimate the value of its property, saying it depends on various factors—suitability for building, accessibility and wetlands classification.

“Weyerhaeuser and its predecessors have owned the majority of this property for over 70 years,” says Doug Hughes of Weyerhaeuser. “The property is highly productive from a timber-growing standpoint and has been an integral part of supplying high-quality raw material.”

But Hughes says the company does evaluate opportunities to sell property. Recently, it sold the land to a developer that brought the Folgers' distribution center to St. Tammany Parish. Rumor also has it Weyerhaeuser has been back and forth at the negotiation table with Schlitterbahn and Disney over the sale of hundreds of acres in Livingston Parish for a theme park, but no deal has ever been announced. Hughes says Weyerhaeuser, as a matter of company policy, does not comment on rumors.

“Over time, increased economic development activity and urbanization have resulted in Weyerhaeuser Company selling some of our timberland to developers,” he adds. “This trend will likely continue along the corridor.”

Weyerhaeuser is also involved in some development of its own. Its subsidiary WREDCo [Weyerhaeuser Real Estate Development Company] is planning a project in St. Tammany Parish called Tamanend, an 848-acre mixed-use development anchored by University Square. That institution will provide campus space for the University of New Orleans, Delgado University, Southeastern Louisiana University, Louisiana Technical College and an advanced studies high school. Tamanend will consist of 1,401 residential units and 430,000 square feet of commercial/office space.

Look for Weyerhaeuser to continue to explore opportunities for higher and best use of its holdings along 10/12.

“We must maintain a large enough land base to operate efficiently,” Hughes says. “However, we believe the development of our holdings along the corridor should not impact Weyerhaeuser's ability to maintain viable timber and manufacturing operations in this region and throughout the state.”