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The final frontier Baton Rouge Business Report

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"We're pretty much the last frontier, and I think we're going to see the largest growth over the next decade or two."—
SINCLAIR KOUNS, developer, Stirling Properties

When it comes to growth, access is everything. The adage holds true in most every city, but especially in Baton Rouge, which has the worst traffic congestion among all mid-sized cities in the country.

Without adequate roads to allow for efficient traffic flow, even the most attractive new subdivisions and retail developments can fail. Just ask Sinclair Kouns, one of the developers and managing members of the University Club on Nicholson Drive, less than two miles south of Bluebonnet Boulevard and just north of the East Baton Rouge-Iberville parish line.

When the subdivision and golf course opened in 1988, it was a jewel in the middle of a rural stretch of south Baton Rouge populated largely by cattle. Though initial sales were promising, Kouns says, they "dropped off dramatically" as a planned extension of Bluebonnet from Burbank Drive to Nicholson repeatedly was delayed.

The 2½-mile extension was finally completed in 2004, providing four-lane access from Interstate 10 to Nicholson, though the speed limit drops to 30 mph as Bluebonnet passes between the Springlake and Fairhill neighborhoods. Kouns says renewed interest in the University Club was "overwhelming almost immediately."

"We went from being virtually inaccessible to being in the middle of the city; from sales of about 10 to 15 lots a year to upwards of 40 or 50," says Kouns, a developer for Stirling Properties. "That was monumental toward opening up this part of the city to development."

Fast-forward seven years, and picture the current prospects for growth in the area: a 0.6-mile, four-lane extension of Staring Lane from Highland Road to Burbank; a 1.9-mile, four-lane widening of Staring from Perkins Road to Highland; a 1.2-mile, four-lane widening of Siegen Lane from Perkins to Highland; and Pinnacle Entertainment's \$357 million River Road casino and hotel, which is scheduled to open Dec. 20.

Meanwhile, some of Baton Rouge's most prominent developers have thousands of vacant acres for planned residential, retail and commercial projects. And this acreage is less than three miles from LSU's 240-acre Innovation Park located between GSRI Avenue and Nicholson.

Kouns, whom fellow developers call "the pioneer" of south Baton Rouge, says it's clear he's going to have more than a few new neighbors in the coming years.

"This is truly the only undeveloped area with large tracts of vacant land left in south Baton Rouge," he says. "We're pretty much the last frontier, and I think we're going to see the largest growth over the next decade or two."

Opening up the roads home

Without question, the three corridors most vital for growth in this New South Baton Rouge are Staring/Essen, Bluebonnet and Siegen. Each of these roads feed I-10, the medical corridor and an abundance of residential, commercial and retail space. And each of these roads also is gridlocked at some point during the morning and evening rush hours, as well as during lunchtime.

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“That’s the internal organs of the parish right now, and I agree that the vacant areas southwest of there are probably going to experience the greatest growth,” says John Fregonese, who is the lead planner on the 30-year FuturEBR master plan, parts of which were released earlier this month.

“But without a plan to more easily move traffic through those areas, both for cars and hopefully for public transit, the real probability is heavy congestion, and that could really hold it back.”

Easing the traffic problems won’t happen overnight, however.

The Staring Lane extension is 85% complete and could be open as early as March. Construction has yet to start on the Staring widening project, which is scheduled for completion in September 2013. The Siegen widening project is 66% complete and could open as early as mid-June. And a 5.7-mile widening of Burbank from West Lee Drive to Highland was completed in April 2009.

Several more projects—all part of the city-parish’s massive Green Light Plan—have yet to reach the construction stage.

A project to four-lane Nicholson from north of Brightside Lane and West Lee to south of Gourrier Avenue is in the planning stage. A project to improve the intersection of Nicholson and Brightside/West Lee is in the design stage. A project to improve Essen as it passes underneath I-10 is in the right-of-way stage. And a project to create a Pecue Lane exit off I-10 is in the planning stage.

ABMB Engineers Managing Principal Mike Bruce, who also is a traffic consultant for FuturEBR, says the Staring and Siegen projects, combined with the others in the Green Light Plan pipeline, should accommodate growth in south Baton Rouge—at least in the short term.

“We have a few years of adequate capacity, depending on how fast the projects in that area are built out,” he says. “But not too far down the road, whether it’s five or 10 years, we’ll obviously be looking at some more alternative routes.”

ON THE PLANTATION: Mike Wampold plans to develop Longwood Plantation on 525 acres at Bluebonnet Boulevard and Nicholson Drive, with commercial, residential and retail components, as well as a community center, church and school.

Wampold’s master plan

It didn’t take long for developers to capitalize on the new growth potential of the vacant land in the vicinity of Bluebonnet and Nicholson once those corridors were connected.

One of the first to buy up land in that area was Mike Wampold, known for office developments City Plaza, II City Plaza, Chase Tower, Chase North Tower, as well as multifamily residential projects like Crescent at University Lake. He’s also responsible for the redevelopment of the former Jimmy Swaggart Bible College dormitory on Bluebonnet into the 256-room Renaissance Hotel, which is scheduled to open by September.

In 2005, Wampold paid \$11.8 million for 525 acres straddling the Bluebonnet extension, with frontage on Nicholson. Four years later, he partnered with friend and fellow developer John Fetzer to buy 350 acres nearby for \$5 million. The two later acquired 600 acres of adjoining land, most of it wetlands.

Wampold has an ambitious master plan for his initial 525 acres, called Longwood Plantation. The mixed-use development includes commercial, residential and retail components, as well as a community center, church and school. The first phase will feature residential, he says, adding that he doesn’t intend on moving too fast on implementing the plan. He

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estimates that it could take as long as a decade to see the entire project to fruition.

“We’re creating the concept for a whole new city,” says Wampold, who describes himself as a “vertical developer” to date. “I mean, it really is a whole city, and I haven’t done that before. So all I know is go slow, do it one piece at a time and do it well, just like we’ve done our other projects.”

Longwood Plantation (click to enlarge)

The first phase of Wampold’s plan could break ground this year and will be complete by the end of 2012, he says. The Village of Longue Vue will be a 100-acre subdivision of about 300 homes on the south side of Bluebonnet, adjacent to the established Fairhill neighborhood.

“I see us continuing with residential development until there’s enough critical mass of rooftops out there to justify a nice commercial development,” he says. “We’re going to take our time, and we’re not going to force it. You have to develop the market.”

Wampold expects to take his plan for the first phase to the Planning Commission in March. Floor plans for single-family homes measure from 1,850 to 2,500 square feet and include such amenities as 11-foot ceilings, hardwood floors and granite countertops. He estimates the homes will range from \$285,000 to \$375,000, or what he calls “the sweet spot” for attracting buyers in the current economy.

“Part of what I think is driving the growth in Baker, Zachary and Central areas is the affordability of the homes being built there,” he says. “Well, guess what? We’re bringing it right to their backyard, and we’ll compete with them point-wise. Plus, we’ll offer better access to downtown, LSU, Perkins Rowe, the Mall of Louisiana and the hospitals.”

Photo Gallery

Green Light Plan projects aimed

at easing traffic congestion

in south Baton Rouge

As Longwood Plantation is being developed, Wampold says, he and Fetzer will work on a master plan for their 350-acre parcel, to be called Burtville Plantation, and likely will take it to the Planning Commission sometime in 2012. The remaining 600 acres of wetlands to the east of their developable land will be left as a low-density wilderness area, he says, with a variety of recreation options for subdivision residents.

With a solid decade’s worth of work ahead, Wampold says he’s not looking to purchase any more land in the area.

“There’s a lot of vacant land there on River Road between the [Pinnacle] casino and downtown,” he says, “but you’ve got to have the access to develop it.”

The neighbors down Nicholson

University Club still is growing, Kouns says, with about 110 lots available in the 900-acre subdivision. Beyond that, there’s another 300 acres of developable farmland that he and his partners own on the west side of Nicholson. That land eventually will be developed, he says, adding there’s currently no timeline or concrete plans.

Between University Club and Wampold’s land is Lexington Estates, which in January received approval for a second

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phase of the planned unit development. Developer Greg Flores has built out 75 of his 263 acres in the subdivision, which began closing on lots in late 2006.

Flores, like Wampold, says he's going to let the market and the economy dictate how quickly the subdivision is built out; he doesn't expect it to happen quickly. He anticipates having 90 homes built and occupied by the fall. Though Flores envisions Lexington Estates remaining largely residential as it expands into a second phase, which includes more than 500 homes, a grocery store and gas station are being considered.

SLOWLY BUT SURELY: Greg Flores has built out 75 of Lexington Estates' 263 acres, but he will let the economy dictate how quickly the remaining land is developed.

"My owners would certainly like to have some closer services," he says.

Such services are expected to arrive in the next few years. A Walmart Supercenter is planned for the southeast quadrant of Bluebonnet at Burbank, and Kevin Nguyen is planning a retail development at Bluebonnet and Siegen.

Walmart purchased its site in 2007, with plans for a 2008 opening. But the recession and the national retail slowdown put the brakes on the project. The company now says construction will begin in spring 2012, with the store opening in 2013. A lot across Bluebonnet from the Walmart site was cleared for future development.

There will be recreational options as well: BREC owns 50 acres on Nicholson between University Club and Lexington Estates. Named Woodstock Park, the land currently is being leased to a hay farmer, says Kristi Barnett, BREC's communications director, but will one day make a nice complement to BREC's nearby Burbank Soccer Complex.

"When populations increase out there, we will be looking at developing it [Woodstock Park] along the lines of a community park—something like City Park," she says. "But that's probably years into the future."

Betting on River Road

Along with a 200-room hotel and a 30,000-square-foot gambling barge, Pinnacle Entertainment's yet-unnamed casino also promises to bring some entertainment and dining options to the area. Three restaurants, an events center and outdoor festival grounds also are part of the first phase of the project.

Darryl May could be the first developer to take advantage of Pinnacle's presence. May has 120 acres under contract just north of the casino's site on River Road, where he plans to construct Sugarcane Lodge, an 80-acre RV resort that he hopes will open by the time the first hand of blackjack is dealt. His long-range plans call for retail space and a hotel.

"I've been thinking about doing this for about three years," May says, "and I found this piece of land that I thought would work well. Pinnacle is kind of the icing on the cake. My plans are not contingent on them, but it certainly gives us a big shot in the arm."

May plans to keep the rural atmosphere in place, with a putting green, swimming pool, sand volleyball courts, wilderness trails and other family amenities.

"I envision the area like a Creole village," he says. "I could see an old-fashioned grocery store there, antique shops and some restaurants."

Planning Commission Director Troy Bunch says no other development plans or rezoning requests in the immediate area have been submitted; all of the land around the Pinnacle site is zoned rural. Although the FuturEBR plan will define the land-use plan going forward, Bunch says the area is unlikely to remain rural.

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“When the city-parish and citizens of East Baton Rouge Parish approved Pinnacle, to me that was a vote to change the land use in the area,” he says. “Certainly, the opening of Pinnacle is going to have a direct influence on commercial and residential development in the immediate area.”

LSU’s innovative park

Already home to the EA Sports videogame testing facility and 28 smaller companies composing the Louisiana Business & Technology Center incubator, LSU Innovation Park has ambitious plans for growth over the next two or three decades.

The LSU Board of Supervisors in 2009 approved a master plan for the 240-acre site, which currently consists of just five buildings and a handful of warehouses. Like the developers on the south side of Gardere, Executive Director Charlie D’Agostino says development of the 132 vacant acres will be slow.

“You’re not going to see it built out to this scale for a long time—probably not in my lifetime or yours,” says D’Agostino, looking over a rendering of the master plan. “We’re talking two to three buildings a year if we’re super successful.”

Because of budget constraints, LSU is unlikely to fund much, if any, of the growth at the innovation park, also home to centers for biomedical research and training, small business development and business emergency operations. Instead, D’Agostino is targeting private companies and federal laboratories in select industries to come to the park and build to LSU’s specifications.

“Our goal is to make this the premier research park in the country, so we’re going to be highly selective as to who we allow to come in and develop,” he says. “It’s a very slow process because we have to find just the right companies.”

MAN WITH A PLAN: Metro Council member Chandler Loupe’s top priority is improving Gardere Lane, a two-lane road that will be a feeder for Pinnacle Entertainment’s \$357 million casino and hotel.

The master plan calls for a new boulevard to be built off Nicholson, to replace the park’s nondescript entrance off GSRI, as well as green space and walking trails around the eight-acres of wetlands on site. There’s even a small outdoor amphitheater on the drawing board.

“There’s potential at some point to have a hotel and a restaurant here, too, but we did make a decision that there will be no residential,” D’Agostino says. “We don’t need to get in that game. And really, the more restaurants and so on that are brought to the developable land south of here, the less of it we have to do. I want to save as much space as possible for research entities and businesses.”

The Louisiana National Guard, which received 50 acres from the state in 2005 as part of the larger land transfer to LSU, is nearing completion of its \$43 million training and emergency response center. D’Agostino notes the guard didn’t have to build its new facility to LSU’s master plan specs.

“But they did,” he says, “because they understand the value of being here and the growth potential we’re bringing to the area.”

While LSU might have a long-range plan, D’Agostino hopes to see some private commercial development spring up around the innovation park in the short term. He says companies graduating from the incubator need their own offices but want to remain close to the LSU resources that have aided in their success.

“If a private developer would build a multitenant building right next door or down the street, I believe, right now, that I could fill up 30,000 or 40,000 square feet just with companies that have either come to me and I’ve turned away or

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companies that will be ready to graduate by the time the building is complete,” D’Agostino says.

Supporting growth

Metro Council member Chandler Loupe is well aware of the growth his already-sprawling district is poised to experience over the next decade. And as with all growth, he knows there will be some pains.

“Sooner or later, we’re going to have to address a lot of issues in that area, as far as fire protection, the sheriff’s office and zoning,” Loupe says. “A lot’s been talked about, but nothing has been done.”

The St. George Fire Protection District ends at Nicholson and doesn’t include the area extending to the Mississippi River. Loupe says St. George will respond to fires outside their district, but stresses a long-term solution should be in place before the casino opens. A Pinnacle spokeswoman says discussions are ongoing between the casino, city officials and others, but no decision has been made.

Additional roadwork is also needed, Loupe says, and his top priority is getting a plan in place to improve Gardere.

“We’ve got a single-lane road with no shoulder that is basically going to be the feeder road to the new casino,” he says. “Something has to be done.”

Pinnacle is required by the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development to spend about \$3.5 million on expanding turn lanes and through lanes and improving intersections at Gardere and Nicholson, Gardere and River Road, Nicholson and Bluebonnet, Burbank and Bluebonnet, and Perkins and Siegen.

But widening Gardere is not required, Bruce says, and can’t be accomplished “without wiping out some homes and businesses.” He notes traffic from I-10 likely will be directed to the casino on Bluebonnet and Siegen.

Long-range plans include extending Staring to Nicholson and widening Nicholson to four lanes to the parish line. Those are supplemental projects in the Green Light Plan—on the drawing board, but unfunded at present.

“Those would add tremendous capacity to the area,” Bruce says, “and there’s no doubt more improvements to the grid will be required as developments come along and populations increase.”

The FuturEBR plan recommends increasing biking and walking trails along the levee from downtown to the Pinnacle site, as well as a light-rail line down Nicholson. Of course, funding those short- and long-term infrastructure projects will be a challenge. Loupe is confident he won’t be the only person lobbying for more dollars from city-parish and state coffers to support the growth.

“We have some real negotiating power,” he says. “With the size of our district, the tax revenue we bring in and the developers in the area—and then throw in LSU—I think we’ll be able to get what we need to grow.”