

Super Region Committee aims to attract business

By *Debbie Glover*
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It could be termed a tale of two cities-New Orleans and Baton Rouge, with the Northshore caught in between.

Although New Orleans and Baton Rouge have often grappled for the same turf for the past 300 years, the newly formed Super Region Committee, or SRC, is joining the southeast Louisiana parishes and its two biggest rivals together to attract new business and solve regional problems affecting the entire area, such as higher education reform, airport traffic, international trade and other economic development and product development opportunities.

The West St. Tammany Chamber hosted Adam Knapp of the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, GNO, Inc. president and CEO Michael Hecht and Super Region Committee member and Northshore businessman Marty Mayer to discuss the newly formed group, their mission and goals.

Knapp said the long-felt tensions between the two cities, including a distrust between their residents for one another, will take a long time to change. However, the mission of the SRC is to band business leaders of the multi-parish area together.

Hecht said the long-term animosity was changed somewhat in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and offered an opportunity to work together in solving problems.

The hurricane scattered businesses and people, economic power resources that New Orleans traditionally held. Alternately, Baton Rouge recognized that they needed New Orleans to flourish.

“There’s been an evolution of thinking since Katrina between New Orleans and Baton Rouge,” said Hecht.

Businessmen now find themselves working together on projects and having ties in both markets, thereby creating an alliance of people wanting to work together. Economic development is like elephant hunting, but product development involves the workplace, brand management and land management.

In marketing, a super region is defined as an area with at least a population of two million. While neither city qualifies on their own, together the population of the area is about 2.1 million. “We can compete together, but not separately,” Hecht said.

The 19 parishes that comprise the area contains 48 percent of the state’s population, 40 percent of employees, 48 percent of the firms in the state, 83 percent of the port volume and 48 of the legislators.

By using these figures, Hecht said it is clear the southeast part of the state is not getting its proportionate share in Louisiana.

To illustrate the group’s new-found coalition, the regional airport idea was studied by the BRAC. Although it was long thought a regional airport between the two cities should be built, the study showed the airport in Kenner is only operating 50 percent of its capacity.

“The future is there,” said Hecht.

Not only did the study find it was the best spot, it also showed the capabilities of serving the entire region, including the Gulf Coast area in Mississippi.

The group also supports the BILD plan for higher education reform. Knapp said the current system creates winners and losers in the state. Instead, BILD’s four-plank program would implement a performance-based funding

formula; raise admission standards at four-year institutions; grant sole authority to adjust self-generated revenue such as tuition and fees to the systems management boards; and establish center of excellence at Louisiana Community and Technical College System campuses and eliminate unproductive and duplicative programs.

At present, the group's three main projects are infrastructure at Louis Armstrong International Airport, higher education and developing international trade.

Future projects for the group include infrastructure improvement and a widening of U. S. Interstate 12 from Baton Rouge through Walker.