

Regional cooperation is key to recovery, East St. Tammany Chamber is told

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By Kate Stevens
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Supporters of a state plan created to reduce the impact of future storms, recover from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and reinvest in existing communities along Louisiana's southern coast stressed the importance of cooperating as a region Thursday instead of focusing on individual communities.

Louisiana Speaks, a long-term community planning initiative of the Louisiana Recovery Authority presented its regional strategies at a luncheon sponsored by the East St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce in Slidell. The regional plan contains three goals: recover sustainably, grow smarter and think regionally.

Recognizing that people will continue to live in or move to hurricane-prone areas along coasts, shores and wetlands, the plan focuses on coastal restoration and improving levee infrastructures, said Hal Cohen, planning director for the Center of Planning Excellence, a Baton-Rouge-based company partnering with Louisiana Speaks.

Public input from workshops and surveys from across the state shaped the plan, Cohen said.

For example, the majority of people who gave their input for the project agreed that future growth, like that of a proposed \$70 million high-speed commuter rail route from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, should stop at cities and towns that already have existing infrastructure to maintain and acquire prospective development. Such a passenger transportation network would help develop regional economies and connect communities, especially in the event of a disaster evacuation, according to the plan.

As part of the plan, local communities will have to forgo thinking of their cities or parishes as individual entities and instead think regionally.

Thinking regionally is something north shore communities should get behind, said Jimmy Maurin, chief executive officer of Stirling Properties and a proponent of the Louisiana Speaks regional plan.

For the first time, the state has "developed a road map for long-term recovery and future growth," Maurin told chamber of commerce members gathered at the luncheon.

Leaders in Covington, Slidell and St. Tammany Parish are just now beginning to understand the importance of cooperation, especially when it comes to solving issues like transportation, said Maurin.

"If we don't begin to think regionally, then we're lost."

While the plan is not dependent on New Orleans, to fully recover, getting the Crescent City up and running again is still a goal southern Louisiana residents need to help accomplish, he continued.

"New Orleans is critical, it is important," Maurin said. "But, one of the things we've got to get focused on regionally is the north shore area has got to basically accept that we're going to be a more urban area for the rest of our life. If you moved up here to live in the country, you need to move again because this is not country anymore. We've got to deal with our issues of being a more urban area while we applaud, cheerlead and do everything we can for New Orleans for it to recover and come back as a cultural center, as a center of tourism, as the brand around the world that lets everybody know we are all part of New Orleans."

The timeline for implementation of projects like the high-speed railway will depend when the state receives funding, said Jeff Hebert, LRA planning director.

Funding possibilities range from Community Development Block Grants or money from the state surplus.

And it's up to supporters like Maurin to convince legislators in Baton Rouge to make the plan happen, Hebert said.

Louisiana Speaks will present its regional plan in Covington and Houma on May 30.

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