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## Stuck in the middle

By Penny Brown (Contact)

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IS IT POSSIBLE to be friendly with both sides engaged in a battle? Martin Mayer is about to find out.

The Stirling Properties president next year becomes the first Northshore businessman to take the reins of GNO Inc., a partnership promoting economic development in the New Orleans region. He's also involved in the I-12 Alliance, a similar federation of five parishes that bills itself as Louisiana's "new economic engine" and does not include the Crescent City. And he has an interest in the 10/12 corridor coalition, a Baton Rouge Area Foundation initiative touting communities along Interstates 10 and 12 from Lake Charles to Slidell that also noticeably excludes New Orleans.

In the tug-of-war over who will emerge as Louisiana's post-Katrina power center,

St. Tammany Parish is a bit like the flag that is tied dead center to the rope. Everyone wants to forge an identity with the parish, which has the kind of demographics that make a developer go, "Ooooh!" Well-educated workforce. Solid-performing schools. High wages. Low poverty.

Mayer rejects any sentiment that would distance St. Tammany from Baton Rouge, New Orleans or the rest of the region. But the realization that the parish itself clearly is gaining influence is not lost on him.

"St. Tammany does not simply want to be treated as a claimed territory by New Orleans or Baton Rouge in this tug-of-war battle," Mayer says. "We want to be considered an equal and valued partner whose role and importance has significantly changed. We are very supportive partners with our fellow parishes in the Greater New Orleans region and the renaissance of New Orleans is of critical importance to us. We also recognize that the entire southeast Louisiana region including New Orleans, Baton Rouge, St. Tammany and all of the parishes in and around that region need to collaborate and work together if we are going to succeed and prosper over the long haul."

AS CHAIRMAN OF the Northshore Business Council, Covington lawyer Howard Daigle took part in the initial 10/12 corridor study by Austin firm GSD&M, which hopes to market the corridor with an "Energy for Life" theme. Part of the strategy is to differentiate the region from the rest of Louisiana, including New Orleans.

Not long ago, Daigle was elected to the GNO Inc. board of directors and now serves as the organization's sector chairman of Advanced Aerospace & Defense Manufacturing.

"I don't find it difficult or requiring a balancing act, from my perspective, to participate in the efforts of each of these groups," Daigle says. "I see both the 10/12 and the I-12 Alliance initiatives encompassing revitalization and economic development for the southeast portion of the state, and certainly the work we're doing with GNO Inc. encompasses these same objectives. Our Northshore Business Council has had no difficulty balancing our collaborative efforts with our economic development friends from Baton Rouge, or Orleans, or Jefferson. A shared objective of all is to make the region competitive with neighboring states."

Danny Schaus, director of governmental affairs for CLECO, is also involved in initiatives on both sides. As a member of the St. Tammany East Chamber of Commerce, he's been a part of getting the I-12 Alliance off the ground, but he's also serving on two committees for GNO Inc.

"I think they will and should complement each other," he says. "The goals are the same and the initiatives are the same. My concern is that we get something as close to seamless as we can."