

## St. Tammany poised to benefit from new regional cooperation

by David Muller, Staff Writer

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Always somewhat of an odd couple, Baton Rouge and New Orleans saw their relationship grow even more bizarre after Hurricane Katrina.

The Capital City saw the Crescent City as hopelessly corrupt and a drain on the region, while the New Orleans was paranoid that Baton Rouge was trying to take some of its assets while shutting it out of regional issues.

And all the while, St. Tammany Parish was in between, a kind of buffer zone where the larger cities were hoping to exert influence.

"After Katrina, the North Shore and St. Tammany became a claim territory, and there was this question of whether St. Tammany was going to be a part of New Orleans or part of Baton Rouge," said **Marty Mayer**, president and CEO of Stirling Properties and former chairman of the economic development group Greater New Orleans Inc.

St. Tammany historically has been part of New Orleans' Metropolitan Statistical Area, and the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway has been seen as another connection to the city.

But in some corners of New Orleans, there was a feeling that Baton Rouge was trying to lay its own roots in St. Tammany, **Mayer** said. Suspicions increased when Baton Rouge included the area in its own demographic information, he said.

Enter the Super Region Committee, which almost immediately began to bridge the growing divide between the two cities.

"What happened was a group of business people who have business interests in both areas said this is not a New Orleans versus Baton Rouge issue," **Mayer** said.

The committee was solidified between GNO Inc. and the Baton Rouge Area Chamber of Commerce, both of which happened to have new CEOs at the time — Michael Hecht and Adam Knapp, respectively.

"We both recognized that our communities working together was the only way to move forward," Hecht said. The two metro areas' populations total more than 2 million people, which he says is more attractive to site selectors.

"I guess you could call it enlightened self-interest."

The Super Region Committee is set on three ways of boosting the area economically: higher education,



Greater New Orleans Inc. President and CEO Michael Hecht has worked with the Baton Rouge Area Chamber of Commerce to improve relations between the two cities. (Photo by Shannon White Diecidue)



promoting international trade and strengthening Louisiana's role as a regional hub. Armstrong New Orleans International Airport as a regional hub.

The partnership between the two cities and the surrounding parishes got a symbolic shot in the arm in May when Baton Rouge Mayor-President Melvin "Kip" Holden and New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu met to sign a "Memorandum of Understanding" aimed at a bilateral approach to tackling the region's socioeconomic issues.

And now, as the Super Region Committee sharpens its focus, few seem to doubt the importance of St. Tammany in this 19-parish group.

"The Super Region Committee really was an outgrowth of the post-Katrina deep animosity that seemed to exist," Mayer said. "It seemed to get worse (after Katrina). It has always existed between the New Orleans community and Baton Rouge."

But if New Orleans has the freewheeling culture and Baton Rouge has the more buttoned-down pragmatism, St. Tammany has the space.

"We've calculated in our planning process that we have enough land for the next 150 years," Parish President Kevin Davis said.

Not only that, but the parish also has a reputable school system, a lower crime rate and other attributes that come with being a less populated area.

"There are a lot of the amenities for family here on the North Shore," Davis said.

And with the exception of Slidell, a majority of the parish is above flood elevation and saw little water after Katrina.

That alone was enough to convince Chevron to move its local headquarters from Gravier Street in New Orleans to a new facility near Covington just more than two years ago. More than 500 employees worked at the New Orleans office, but about half already lived on the North Shore. The company briefly considered moving to Houston, but opted to stay near its onshore and offshore operations in Louisiana.

Davis said the parish is talking with a company that would add 400 jobs and another that would add 20 but was not willing to discuss details.

"Everyday of the week we're working with somebody," he said.

Davis and others also touted the parish's logistics and ability to accommodate larger, national or international businesses; interstates 10, 12 and 59 converge within its boundaries and a fourth, Interstate 55, is in neighboring Tangipahoa Parish.

It is for these reasons, Mayer said, that in the tense days after Katrina, Baton Rouge and New Orleans were trying to stake their claim in the parish.

And, rather than St. Tammany being sandwiched between these two larger populated areas, Mayer likens it to one side of a three-sided shape.

"In my opinion it's not an either/or situation," Mayer said. "We feel the North Shore is one point on this triangle and a significant part of this region."•

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