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Boom follows Katrina in St. Tammany Parish

 By MARY FOSTER
 Associated Press Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) -- Fifty years ago the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, dubbed the world's longest bridge, opened as a 24-mile connection between a sparsely populated area just west of New Orleans and the pine belt of St. Tammany Parish on the lake's north shore.

Bridge planners anticipated the baby boom-driven growth that spilled into the suburbs from New Orleans, but didn't foresee Hurricane Katrina when they cut a ceremonial ribbon on Aug. 30, 1956.

Almost 49 years to the day later, vehicles streamed north bumper-to-bumper on the Causeway - by now upgraded to two parallel spans - as thousands fled the approach of Katrina, which made landfall on Aug. 29, 2005.

St. Tammany, which suffered less damage than parishes on the south shore, became a haven for evacuees, especially the more affluent, whose homes were destroyed by Katrina's floodwaters. Before Katrina, St. Tammany had been fast-growing. Now it's exploiting perhaps its most important quality, one that New Orleans can't match: land. St. Tammany is 850 square miles, compared to 250 square miles for New Orleans, and, more importantly is largely elevated out of the flood plain.

As hard-hit New Orleans and other south shore parishes struggle to kindle an economic rebound, these are boom times on the lake's north shore. Consider:

- In the year since the storm, St. Tammany's population has grown to an estimated 260,000 from its pre-Katrina estimate of 220,000. "We've exceeded our five-year growth estimate in a single year," said parish spokeswoman Susan Parsons.

- Traffic on the Causeway jumped from 32,000 vehicles a day pre-Katrina, 43,000 now.

- Some south shore businesses, concerned about a repeat of the devastation of Katrina, are shifting their operations north of Lake Pontchartrain.

- Rapid population growth is pressuring the housing market, and in many neighborhoods prices for single-family homes are up sharply despite the cooling of housing nationally as interest rates have risen.

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St. Tammany's experience could be a window into development across the tier of parishes north of the lake, known as the Florida Parishes. Indeed, some see the Interstate 12 corridor, extending east to west from Slidell in eastern St. Tammany to Baton Rouge, as a hot spot for economic growth in the coming years.

Even plans under consideration for years to expand the Causeway, either by building a third span or adding lanes to the existing bridges, are being rethought. Planners are examining early indications that north-south commerce is becoming less important despite increased use of the Causeway since Katrina.

"The connection now is much stronger east and west," said Marty Mayer, a real estate agent who chairs the St. Tammany-West Chamber of Commerce. "We have many people going from here to Baton Rouge these days. I think along I-12 will become one continuous urban corridor soon."

Critical to sustained growth on the north shore is development of a business core beyond the services and agricultural sectors that now dominate. Some companies have decided to put their future on the region's higher elevation, shifting from the below-sea-level bowl of New Orleans.

Chevron is one.

The oil company is relocating its office, and 550 workers, from New Orleans' Central Business District to Covington, the parish seat of St. Tammany.

"We decided to make the move because it positions the company for near and long term operations in the Gulf," said Chevron spokesman Matt Carmichael. "It was a decision to stay in Louisiana rather than consolidate our operation outside the state."

Chevron's move sends a signal that the corporate community is concerned about the ability of New Orleans' rebuilt levee system to protect the city, Mayer said.

"It's a risk reduction because it gets them out of the levee district and its problems," Mayer said. "Many businesses are having a hard time recruiting and retaining people in New Orleans."

That sense is echoed by Janet Speyrer, associate dean of research at the University of New Orleans College of Business.

"There is a perception that the town is less safe than it was pre-Katrina," Speyrer said. "In reality, the city was never safe. But now people in these areas are uncomfortable. They're looking for a place that causes them less worry."

The north shore parishes may be their refuge, said Dr. Yu Hsing, a professor of economics at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond.

"People will try to play it safe," Hsing said. "It's just worry over the random probability of when another big one will hit New Orleans."

"We have a very attractive lifestyle," said Brenda Reine, executive director of the St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation. Two key areas that have plagued New Orleans, public safety and education, are the linchpins, she said. "Crime is almost nonexistent, maybe one murder a year. Our schools are the best in Louisiana, and meet or exceed the national standards. It's just a great place to live and work."

Reflecting the surge in demand are real estate values, particularly in the parish's western end near the Causeway, which have reached new record highs. From Jan. 1 through April 2006, the average house sold for \$217,804 parish-wide, according to the St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation. That's up from \$181,381 in the first four months of 2005.

"They (western St. Tammany) did not sustain the damage from Katrina that the east did," said Ken Levy of Latter & Blum Real Estate. "And they are out of the flood plain."

New subdivisions are popping up in Covington and in the Mandeville and Madisonville areas near the lake. Along the bustling U.S. 190 corridor in the Covington area new businesses are

sprouting, replacing the stands of pine trees that once lined the roadway.

Remnants of the sleepy, rural parish that existed before the Causeway can be found mostly north of Interstate 12, where pines and horse farms still dot the landscape. But here, too, change is coming. "It doesn't look like that will last long," Parsons said.

Mayer concedes the challenges ahead in enhancing quality of life are formidable.

Planners must begin dealing with the need for more services, a growing crime rate, and urban sprawl, keys to sustaining an attractive quality of life, he said.

"Our infrastructure was strained before, it's now way over the strained standpoint," Mayer said. "The question is how do we do long range planning in a short time?"

A 10-year plan on upgrading infrastructure was completed before Katrina, St. Tammany Parish president Kevin Davis said. "Sure, it's a shock to wake up and find 70,000 people have moved in, but we were positioned to handle it. We just have to compress that 10-year plan into a two- or three-year plan," he said.

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