



Collision course

By Steve Sanoski (Contact)

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District Attorney Hillar Moore III says years of inadequate funding have left him with no choice but to ask taxpayers for additional property taxes to fully fund his office. The Baton Rouge Police Department operates from a building on Mayflower Street that quite literally is falling apart.

The Capital Area Transit System required a \$1.3 million bailout that will take it through the end of the year without interrupting service. A number of bridges have been closed for months; officials say dozens more are in jeopardy of being closed. And traffic congestion has reached the unenviable rank of worst in the nation among comparable cities.

And those are just some of the short-term operational and infrastructure needs facing East Baton Rouge Parish. A poor track record of planning, paired with a parochial, pay-as-you-go attitude, has left the parish on a collision course of needs requiring billions of dollars in funding.

A \$748 million bond issue that focused on public safety, infrastructure improvements and River Center renovations would have addressed some—but not all—of the problems. But that became a moot point after the Metro Council twice rejected Mayor Kip Holden's proposal.

Opponents of the capital improvements package never questioned the need for some of the projects; they dismissed it for a lack of timeliness, adequate detail and scope. Holden didn't appear to be in any mood to sugarcoat the state of the city-parish after the council's 8-2 vote on Aug. 10.

"The bottom line is that Baton Rouge can't step forward if we're stuck in a spot now," he says. "We're in neutral now, but I just hope we don't go into reverse."

Because the state's tax structure is so light on property taxes and so heavily reliant on sales taxes, Louisiana Budget Project Director Eddie Ashworth says, officials have little choice but to ask taxpayers to approve new taxes to address needs that have basic services, economic development and continued growth hanging in the balance.

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SAFETY FIRST: District Attorney Hillar Moore III's bond package likely will be presented in fall 2012, preferably in conjunction with a broader public safety plan agreed upon by the Metro Council and local law enforcement officials.

"Municipal and parish governments don't have the control over finances that cities and counties in other states have due to the very high homestead exemption," he says. "People can get mad at local officials for proposing increases in property taxes or sales—and obviously they do—but the reality is [officials] don't have many other options."

In a state in which the governor has built a loyal base of support by pledging to kill any new tax that reaches his desk, East Baton Rouge Parish officials have come up with three bond proposals just this year.

Moore says his package likely will be presented next fall, preferably in conjunction with a broader public safety plan agreed upon by the Metro Council and

local law enforcement officials. A commission formed by Holden to look at ways to fix the public transit system also is recommending that a property and sales tax increase be placed on the ballot in 2012 to give CATS a dedicated funding source.

East Baton Rouge Parish voters historically have been skeptical of any tax hike for which they can't see an immediate impact in their own neighborhoods. Holden sounds to some people like a broken record when he tells voters that the parish has not approved a major infrastructure bond issue in nearly 60 years.

Parish voters have rejected three bond proposals in the past four years that included new public safety facilities such as a police headquarters, juvenile detention facility and parish prison. But at least a dozen neighborhoods have voted to create their own private security patrols through crime districts with annual dues.

John Spain, executive vice president of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, says a parochial way of thinking is partly to blame for the rejections. But that's not the only reason: Recent capital improvements packages have been floated during economically difficult times, and were not presented in such a way that voters felt they had all of the facts necessary to fund the most important projects. An intensifying rift between Holden and the Metro Council hasn't helped either, he says.

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"We cannot get people to tax themselves on large and complex issues without our leaders' being at the forefront to educate them about both the broad vision and the specifics," Spain says. "It's hard to do that when you're bogged down in arguments. The polls show that people are unhappy with what's happening in Washington, D.C., politically, and to a lesser extent we're seeing some of that squabbling in our local government. That's fairly recent, but we can't afford it long-term."



Photo by Marie Constantin

TOO MUCH STRUCTURE: Louisiana Budget Project Director Eddie Ashworth says the state's tax structure is so light on property taxes and so heavily reliant on sales taxes that officials have little choice but to ask taxpayers to approve new taxes to address needs.

Elizabeth "Boo" Thomas, president/CEO of the Center for Planning Excellence, admits the collective short- and long-terms needs facing East Baton Rouge Parish are "pretty overwhelming," but she sees rays of hope penetrating the storm clouds.

Thomas points to the Green Light Plan, which has seen the completion of 18 significant road projects since voters agreed in 2005 to extend an existing half-cent sales tax for 23 years.

"Hopefully, successes like the Green Light Plan will continue to shift the voters' perception of how their tax dollars are handled," she says. "If they can see the progress and the benefits of a small tax like the one approved for the Green Light Plan, I think they're more likely to vote for a large one to address our other needs."

Thomas says the city-parish has begun planning for the future in a way that's never been done, citing Holden's commission that looked at developing a viable public transit system. Even more significant, she says, is the 30-year FuturEBR master plan that's been years in the making and is scheduled to go before the Metro Council for final approval later this year.

Thomas helped conduct community meetings for the Horizon Plan, the 20-year master plan that FuturEBR is replacing, and she's had a lot of involvement in the new plan. This time, she says, the city-parish has gotten it right.

"In the Horizon Plan, we really didn't start with a vision,"

Thomas says. "It was more about asking people about what

they thought was wrong in their particular district. With FuturEBR, it started with a very comprehensive look at where we are. It's included a broad discussion about where we want to go: We've tried to determine what's held us back in the past, and we've identified a plan for moving forward. It's a much more holistic approach. So there is cause for hope, I promise."

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Posted by phil on August 24, 2011 at 12:11 p.m. (Suggest removal)

While some planning is needed, why are we spending \$millions on plans instead of actually addressing some of the real issues? If you keep up with all of the tax money spent on loop planning, CATS studies, downtown plans, the FUTUREBR plans etc it adds up to a considerable chunk of change. Also why hasn't our local government addressed infrastructure repairs in the last 60 years (other than roads and sewer which we are already paying plenty for)? Did all of these problems just develop over night? Who decides when a tax vote is needed - it isn't really the public is it? Who decided to spend \$millions on pet projects, concerts etc in the past instead of spending it on infrastructure repairs or police protection? It wasn't the public was it? In addition why are we diverting existing/future tax funds for TIF funded projects when that money could be used for infrastructure repairs instead? We taxpayers get to pay (directly or indirectly) for new motels and River Park projects and then also get faced with new taxes for infrastructure repairs? I have already written a lot about this in the past, so I guess this is enough for now.

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