



“St. Charles Parish 2030: Bridge to the Future” Comprehensive Plan



FORUM RESULTS AND
DRAFT VISION STATEMENT

S u b m i t t e d t o :

St. Charles Parish 2030 Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee

S u b m i t t e d b y :



Wallace Roberts & Todd, LLC

Last Revised: October 20, 2009

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PREFACE

Starting with a series of public forums held between August and October of 2009, our Parish embarked on a mission to create a Vision Statement—a glimpse of our desired future, and the starting point for preparing our new Comprehensive Plan. We are doing this at an important milestone in our history: a time of transition, characterized by new challenges but also new opportunities to build bridges to greater unity of purpose and direction in our Parish. During the community forums, our citizens—both youth and adults—expressed widely shared values about what they like about life in St. Charles Parish. They also spoke clearly about the Parish’s present shortcomings, and about their hopes for the future.

This Vision Statement represents our shared *destination*: the future that we, as a community, aspire to reach through the implementation of goals, strategies and actions to be framed in the Comprehensive Plan. When complete, the new St. Charles Parish 2030 “Bridge to the Future” Comprehensive Plan will be the means to keep us on track to become the community that our Vision Statement affirms we aspire to be. Our community’s future, and that of all its citizens, will be profoundly influenced by the degree to which we succeed in this mission. To more fully appreciate the significance of the challenge that we face, we start by defining what a comprehensive plan is and how we will use it.

The Comprehensive Plan for St. Charles Parish will be...

A reflection of our values, aspirations and our shared vision

Just as one would not begin a trip without first identifying a destination, the planning process starts by defining the community’s destination, the kind of place that we want St. Charles Parish to be in 2030, the plan horizon. Our citizens have expressed their views about the community, about its current strengths and weaknesses, and about what they see as opportunities and threats. In listening to what citizens are saying, broad areas of consensus emerged concerning the kind of community we want to become—or to remain. These expressions of community values provide the basis for a shared vision of St. Charles Parish’s future. This *Vision Statement* articulates our expectations for the future; it frames the mandate for the Comprehensive Plan and the strategic directions necessary to achieve the vision.

A guide for the management of change

If our vision is to be realized, the Comprehensive Plan must first set a solid foundation for directing future growth and change. To exert this influence, the Comprehensive Plan must be actively applied as a guide for the many decisions that will determine each increment of growth and change. While local government is taking a leadership role in this effort, the Comprehensive Plan will call on citizens, institutions and the Parish’s corporate citizens to coordinate their efforts with a shared sense of direction and a renewed spirit of partnership.

The foundation for policies, strategies and actions

The Comprehensive Plan will examine policies and strategies for the community's infrastructure, transportation, land use, economic development, capital improvements and the protection of the Parish's vast natural resources. Following Comprehensive Plan adoption, we should expect substantial adjustments to Parish policies, zoning regulations and capital investment priorities.

Our 20-year "To Do" list

The influence that the Comprehensive Plan will have on the future of St. Charles Parish will be a product of the vision that inspires it, and the actions taken to realize it. This Vision will not be fulfilled merely because we may agree with it. It will not be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather, it will be realized by steady, deliberate progress in adhering to a well-defined "game plan" of effective short and long-term actions and a commitment to stay the course.

SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY FORUM INPUT/ AREAS OF CONSENSUS

Between August 18, and October 12, 2009, citizens of St. Charles Parish were encouraged to participate in community forum meetings held at the following locations:

- Killona Fire District #10
- Destrehan High School
- St. Rose Public Library
- Hahnville High School
- Westbank Regional Library
- KC Hall in Norco
- Des Allemands Fire Station
- Ama Mt. Zion Baptist Church
- Bayou Gauche Fire Hall
- Hahnville Fire Station

Additional forum sessions were conducted to receive input from specific groups. First, to gain the perspective of the youth of the Parish, two sessions were held with students at the St. Charles Parish Satellite Center. Two other sessions took place with members of the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee and the Economic Development Council. The various community forums were advertised in a number of ways, including: newspaper, radio and television advertisements; the project and Parish websites; flyers; mailers; and, personal appeals by members of the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee. In total, some 534 persons participated in some way, including approximately 281 participants in the general public forums, 160 student participants, and the remainder in the forums conducted with the steering committee and the EDC, plus 56 online responses and comments. The aim in collecting all this input was to focus the planning process on key areas of citizen concern and aspirations for the future. The tabulation of input from all the sessions is included in Appendix A. The consolidated results include ideas submitted online, by email, or by phone. The online responses and other comments are collected in Appendix B. The results of the forum sessions are also posted on the project website, www.stcharles2030.blogspot.com.

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The community forums consisted of facilitated small group discussions, which posed the following four questions.

- *What are the **present strengths** of St. Charles Parish? What are the community's characteristics that we value and seek to retain?*
- *What are the **present weaknesses** of St Charles Parish? What deficiencies should we seek to correct?*
- *What **future opportunities** should we pursue to make St. Charles Parish a better community?*
- *What **future threats or challenges** should we anticipate and prepare for?*

Upon tabulating hundreds of citizen comments in response to these questions, areas of community consensus emerged around several themes for each of these questions. These themes, and the ideas associated with them, serve as the "raw material" for the articulation of the Vision Statement, which follows this section.

Strengths

Community Character/Culture/Heritage/People: the Parish's friendly, small town atmosphere; near enough to the urban amenities and activities in New Orleans, but retaining a country atmosphere; a family-oriented community with a strong sense of heritage and a safe place to raise children.

Education: a strong, high quality public education system, good school facilities and sports programs, community education opportunities and the outstanding opportunities at the Satellite Center.

Economy/Business: a tax base strengthened by core industries; the economic value of the Mississippi River; reasonable cost of living and a favorable business climate.

Community Facilities and Services: good local law enforcement and emergency services; libraries; senior citizen activities; church and youth/sports programs.

Other perceived strengths included recreational programs and activities, outdoor/natural resource activities, good, responsive government and low levels of traffic congestion.

Weaknesses

Transportation/Mobility: the lack of a complete, connected road network; substandard, narrow, unsafe roads with open ditches; lack of key east-west and north/south highway corridors; impact of railroads; lack of bicycle-pedestrian friendliness; lack of public transportation.

Storm Vulnerability/Hazards: the lack of a complete levee system (West Bank); flooding/lack of drainage; poor maintenance of drainage ditches; inadequate weak emergency warning system (tornadoes); lack of emergency service coordination.

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Community Facilities and Services –lack of a multi-purpose civic center; thin, spread-out youth programs and activities (no YMCA); poor or limited water access (boat launches); lack of support for the arts; sparse activities for seniors; no re-cycling; no mosquito control; poor cell phone service.

Entertainment/Retail: lack of a substantial local retail base (having to shop in Metairie/Kenner or Houma), lack of entertainment (movie theater, bowling alley); lack of youth activities.

Community Character/Social and Geographic Divisions: litter/lack of property upkeep; blight/abandonment; perceived East Bank-West Bank divisions; lack of a common identity; racial/social/cultural divisions; social ills; lack of minority/youth participation.

Economy/Business Development: lack of economic diversification; over-reliance on a few (heavy) industries; business-unfriendly regulatory environment; excessive tax exemptions; no Better Business Bureau; not enough challenging jobs for youth; limited opportunities for career advancement.

Other weaknesses included environmental concerns such as pollution and coastal erosion, government shortcomings, lack of certain types of recreational facilities (boat launches) and a lack of housing choice (affordable / seniors) and a lack of vocational training and deficient infrastructure.

Opportunities

Community Facilities and Services: a general-purpose civic facility for community events and meetings (civic center); recycling program; special purpose facilities and programs (police outreach, libraries; farmers market; river ferry; expanded cable TV offerings).

Economic/Business Development: diversify the economy; explore opportunities for “green” industries; eco-tourism; better use of incentives for more retail; local business development; better leveraging of core industries; better marketing and promotion; taking advantage of new highway and interstate corridors/interchanges for retail/business development; more employment opportunities for youth.

Entertainment/Activities: more things for youth to do, (movies, bowling, water park, etc.), restaurants, entertainment for all ages.

Character Enhancement/Identity: litter control/beautification/corridor revitalization initiatives; maintain rural character; greater appreciation for historic/French heritage; opportunities to bring people together; overcome divisions; more community gatherings and festivals; greater civic pride and shared identity.

Education: more elementary schools; technical/vocational training; enlarge the Satellite Center; more opportunities for college prep; expansion of life-long learning (financial literacy/culture/arts); expand library system.

Manage Growth & Development: well managed growth; plan for development/impacts of I-49; consistent/updated zoning; encourage desired/needed development types (higher end retail, light industry/technology, patio homes riverfront condos), raise development quality standards (planned development; walkability; green space & buffer requirements; subdivision standards; more landscaping),



19 THREATS SATE CATR 12/2/09

- 8 • DANGER FROM CHEM PLANTS
- 6 • VULNERABILITY FROM FLOODING / LACK OF LEVEES
- 2 • OVERPOPUL = TRAFFIC
- 2 • NOT ENOUGH HOUSING
- 7 • AIR POLLUTION
- 4 • INADEQUATE HOSP. SERVICES
- 2 • HOUSING DETERIORATION
- 0 • TERRORISM TARGETING WATERFORD & CHEM PLANTS
- 2 • LACK OF REC SERVICES.
- 2 • NOT ENOUGH STREET LIGHTING
 - DANGEROUS ROAD
 - NO BOARD APTS
 - DITCHES
- 2 • CRIME
- 1 • LACK OF PROGRESS = TOO SLOW
- 3 • LACK OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE
- 7 • LACK OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES

OPPORTUNITIES

- 3 AGENCIES WORKING TOGETHER
- 6 CONTROL GROWTH ~~Development~~
- INCORPORATE GROWTH WITH FLOOD/HURRICANE POTENTIAL
- 3 ENCOURAGE SMALL BUSINESS
- BIKEPATH ON DAVIS - DIVERSION LEVEE + MISSISSIPPI LEVEES
- 4 EXPAND SALVADOR WILDLIFE AREA TO ^{Neighborhood} WILLOW RIDGE
- PRESERVE WET LAND - FROM DEVELOPMENT Res/comm
- 1 BETTER UNDERSTANDING POLITICIANS / PROCESS / PRESSURES
- 6 I-49 - FOR BEST RESULT
- 1 CAPITALIZE ON SCHOOL FUNDING / RESTRUCT



better utilization of vacant/abandoned properties; revitalize older buildings; complete and implement the comprehensive plan and new zoning.

Other identified opportunities included initiatives to improve mobility with an improved road network, new highway linkages and public transit; completion of levee system and improved drainage; development of more park and recreation facilities and programs; initiatives in environmental and resource protection, as well as improvements to governance, housing and health services.

Threats

Storm Vulnerability/Hazards: hurricane storm surge vulnerability (West Bank); potential accidents/spills from aging industrial plants; transportation of hazardous materials; limited evacuation capacity/lack of a shelter.

Environmental Degradation: loss of wetlands, erosion, land subsidence, rising sea levels, loss of developable land, threats to wildlife, pollution/emissions/dust from industrial plants.

Loss of Character/Social Problems: increased crime/drugs/delinquency (resulting from growth); loss of youth; blight and disinvestment in certain areas of the community; continuing divisions over geography/race/income/cultures; loss of heritage/rural character/way of life.

Undesired Growth and Development: undesired forms of development (sprawl, trailer parks), overdevelopment, uneven growth, growing traffic problems, loss of growing room.

Other perceived threats include poor governance, loss of mobility, stress on service providers (teachers, police), decline in education due to funding shortfalls as well as external security threats.

OBSERVATIONS: COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

It is instructive that most citizens of St. Charles Parish tend to agree on core values: what they value most. For example, the majority cherish the special character of St. Charles Parish, its small town quality, neighborliness, rural setting, historic heritage and its natural resources and beauty.

Many, however, also point out shortcomings to life in St. Charles Parish: the lack of things to do, particularly for youth, and the necessity to travel to Kenner or Metairie for major shopping. Another downside perceived by some is that, because the population is so dispersed, the Parish lacks a common, shared identity and continues to be divided by geography, race and background. The perceived East-West divide still lingers for some.

For many as well, proximity to urbanized Jefferson and Orleans Parishes is both a blessing in a curse: a blessing in that the commute to shopping or employment is still tolerable; a curse in that this close proximity means growth pressures that might cause the Parish to “overdevelop” and lose the rural small town character that most want to retain. Clearly, most do not want to become like, or to merge together with, the Parish’s highly urbanized neighbors.

Virtually everyone recognizes and values the outstanding quality of local public education. Many residents specifically note, with great pride, the Satellite Center, both for its educational excellence and its engaged students, as well as its unifying influence on a far-flung Parish.

Almost everyone also agrees on what is missing in St. Charles Parish, beginning with basic infrastructure. They recognize the need for adequate levee protection, particularly for the most vulnerable West Bank, coupled with the need for adequate drainage.

Similarly, most believe that the Parish is mobility-challenged, with a road network that is disconnected by the presence of barriers and missing links, and with many roads deficient due to open ditches, narrow lanes, and lack of street lighting or room for pedestrians and bicyclists.

A majority also agree on that the Parish needs to pay greater attention to its character and aesthetics, with initiatives to curb littering, and clean up unmaintained and abandoned properties. Many of the participants point out the unsightly character of some commercial corridors and the need to raise standards for property upkeep and development quality. Others noted missing or deficient public facilities and services, including the lack of a Parish recycling program, as well as over-stretched volunteer fire departments.

Nearly everyone values the Parish's major heavy industries for the jobs they provide and for their sizable contributions to the tax base and to civic affairs. However, there is also widespread concern expressed about the hazards these industries may present, and the vulnerability to damaging economics impacts should one or more of these employers be lost to natural disaster, or to obsolescence, global economic shifts or foreign competition. Consequently, most residents recognize the value of economic diversification, particularly towards lighter, cleaner technology industries with greater employment opportunities, to allow the Parish to retain its talented and educated youth.

On issues of commercial development, attitudes are more divergent. Some desire to be more self-sufficient, with more shopping opportunities and less "outsourcing" of retail sales (and the associated tax base) to neighboring parishes. Others, on the other hand, are concerned that an increase in commercial development, particularly "big box" stores, will change community character and add to traffic, making the Parish more "urban" than they care to become. Another matter on which there is a divergence of opinion is simply on the broad issues of "growth." Some residents perceive that the Parish has ample growing room, while others are concerned that, after taking out land that is constrained by wetlands or FEMA regulations, developable land and related "growing room" is actually very limited.

While these areas of agreement and divergence of opinion represent the composite attitudes of all 450 participants, it is interesting to contrast the attitudes and perceptions of the 160 youth participants, with the attitudes of the adults. Among the youth, the highest-ranking community "strengths" (*Community Character, Education, Economy and Community Facilities and Services*) were given nearly the exact same relative emphasis as among the adults. However, in the category of "weaknesses," the lack of entertainment and "things to do," as well as the perceived lack the diversity in local jobs and career opportunities, were the over-riding concerns among young participants. Perhaps not surprisingly, "poor cell phone service" was also a common complaint among the youth. These exceeded the priority concerns of the adults for *Transportation/Mobility* and *Storm Vulnerability*.

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Just as in the category of “weaknesses,” under “opportunities” the over-riding priority of youth is the development of more recreation and leisure activities. Most often cited as missing were a mall, bowling alley, water park, movie theater, shooting range, and restaurants and shops. Finally, under the category “threats,” the over-riding concerns of youth had to do with the health of the environment, unwanted change in the small town character of the Parish, such as crime and drugs, and public health threats such as increasing obesity and industrial accidents.

ST. CHARLES PARISH 2030 VISION

This Vision Statement is written from a perspective of some twenty years into the future. It expresses what we, the citizens of St. Charles Parish, envision and desire our community to be like in 2030, and it reflects on all that we will have accomplished since the initiation of our new comprehensive plan in 2009.

In 2030, St. Charles Parish is a vibrant, friendly community, proud of its heritage and surrounded by unspoiled nature. We are a community that has taken advantage of its strategic location, and wisely managed growth and change to achieve:

- *A strong, diversified economy that offers ample, challenging job opportunities for all, allowing the Parish to retain its talented youth;*
- *A “small-town” way of life, but enriched with a full array of educational, cultural and recreational opportunities;*
- *A sound infrastructure system that offers reliable protection from natural disaster, provides for optimum mobility in a variety of modes of travel, and supports sound growth;*
- *A balanced development pattern that offers a range of housing choices in livable neighborhoods, and commercial and civic activities and services that are needed by our resident population;*
- *A character of development that reflects the value we place on our scenic natural beauty and our culture, heritage and community identity; and*
- *A community of educated, engaged and caring citizens with diverse backgrounds, but sharing a common identity and commitment to serve.*

This Vision of St. Charles Parish in the year 2030 is built around five major themes:

- *Building on a Solid Foundation: Basic Infrastructure and Safety*
- *Economic Strengthening and Diversification*
- *Framework for Sustainable Growth*
- *Full Array of Public Services and Facilities*
- *Enhancing Community Character, Shared Identity and Connectedness*

The following sections describe in detail, for each of these topical areas, the vision that will have been achieved by the year 2030.

Building on a Solid Foundation: Basic Infrastructure and Safety

- Working closely with Federal and State agencies we have **hastened to complete levees** and other protective measures crucial to our protection against storm surge vulnerabilities.
- We have planned, prioritized and implemented new investments to **upgrade substandard roads** with retrofits to **improve safety**, both for motorists and **pedestrians and bicyclists who share our roads**.
- In conjunction with LDOTD, we have created **new east- west and north-south road corridors** to provide a **more integrated Parish-wide road network** and reduce travel times and congestion.
- We have applied **development standards in a way that supports a functional transportation system** through guidelines for access management, road connectivity and the reservation of future roadway corridors necessary for an integrated network.
- We have investigated and pursued greater choice in local and regional alternatives to auto reliance, including **transit service** and potential **regional rail** connections and Parish-wide accommodations for pedestrians and bicyclists.
- To coincide with completion of our levee system we have **implemented a comprehensive drainage plan** and associated pumping stations and other improvements.
- In coordination with FEMA and other governmental entities we have **revised our development standards and regulations to minimize damage risk** to new development.
- We have invested in expanded sewer system capacity to adequately service existing development and anticipated growth.

Economic Strengthening and Diversification

- We have worked closely with our **core industries** to accomplish the following:
 - **Minimize risks and hazards** associated with plant sites and transportation and with appropriate uses within buffer zones;
 - Ensure we are taking advantage of all opportunities to accommodate **smaller business opportunities** in support of core industries; and
 - Anticipate **global economic trends** and any associated **risks to our major employers**.
- We have conducted a comprehensive effort to **diversify the economy** by attracting desired compatible businesses and employers, including:
 - Alternative energy and green technologies

- Technology/information-based industries
 - Eco-tourism and cultural tourism
 - Local family and youth entertainment
 - Film industry
 - Medical and health services
 - Appropriately scaled and compatible retail
- We continue to support and coordinate with the public school system and other education providers to **provide vocational training programs** to meet the labor needs of existing as well as targeted business segments.
 - We have contributed to a **thriving local small business community** through incentives and business incubators and through public – private ventures to promote and market St. Charles Parish.
 - We have sought to maintain vital **agricultural and fishing sectors** of our local economy, which are an important part of our heritage.

Framework for Sustainable Growth

- We have carefully **planned our limited developable land area** for the **optimum land use balance**: providing for healthy economic diversification and improving quality of life with an array of housing types, commercial activities and civic uses.
- We have **re-tooled zoning** and our development standards to **raise the bar of quality** while **removing impediments to sound growth** through greater flexibility and consistent enforcement. Our new standards encourage:
 - A wider variety of housing choices
 - Neighborhood livability, walkability and roadway connectedness
 - Retention of open space and greenway corridors
 - Accommodation of civic activities, neighborhood commercial uses and recreation
 - Compatibility with historic character and context
 - Safe access management
- We have planned for the **commercial and employment opportunities that will be created by new I-49 interchanges** in a careful, appropriate manner, while mitigating potential negative impacts to existing business along US 90.
- We have encouraged **reinvestment and revitalization of abandoned and neglected properties** in our community through a variety of regulatory tools and incentives.

Full Array of Public Services and Facilities

- We have created a centrally located **multi-purpose center** that supports variety of civic, cultural, recreational and social activities and major events, and that has been a **unifying influence** on the Parish.
- We continue to celebrate our **outstanding public school system** and have supported expansion to meet growth needs and to broaden opportunities for **college preparation, vocational training** and **life-long learning** for adults.
- We have created an **outstanding recreation system** with conveniently located parks and expanded opportunities to enjoy our waterways and other natural resources.
- We have investigated and, consistent with our fiscal resources, introduced **new and expanded public services and facilities**, such as:
 - A recycling program for residents and businesses
 - A full time, paid Parish firefighting force
 - Exceptional and diversified health care services and facilities
 - Improved/expanded library information technology system
 - Shelters for women and children
- We have **encouraged and worked closely with local utilities and non-profit providers** to improve and expand the array of public services offered in our communities.
- We have coordinated with social service and health providers as well as volunteer organizations to serve the needs of our senior citizens.

Enhancing Community Character, Shared identify and Connectedness

- We have **maintained the Parish's rural, small-town character** by encouraging development that retains open space and is consistent with the scale of our community.
- We have preserved the **unique identities of the many small communities**, as well as our Parish's historic and cultural resources.
- We have promoted a **high benchmark for the quality and character of new development**, through standards designed to reflect our community's scale, and unique character.
- Through festivals, events, and civic involvement that celebrate our community, we have overcome divisions of geography, race and background, and are a unified **community of caring neighbors**.
- Our sense of **community pride** is reflected in the care taken to maintain property and curb littering and neglect.

- We nurture our most valuable resource—our youth—by supporting excellence in our public schools and by challenging our young people to become engaged in the life of the community. We have addressed educational disparities and have raised performance levels among our children and youth.

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