

DDD COMMISSION MEETING, MINUTES

May 9, 2023, 8:00 AM

Baton Rouge Area Chamber (BRAC) 564 Laurel

Board Members in Attendance: Mr. Eric Dexter-Chairman, Mr. Prescott Bailey-Treasurer, Ms. Melanie Montanaro, Mr. Scott Hensgens

Absent: Mr. Jude Melville-Vice Chairman, Mr. Patrick Michaels-Secretary, Mr. Gary Jupiter

Others in Attendance: Rannah Gray, Jason Crain, Tami Rodney, Jeffery Leuenberger, Sarah Amacker, Kate Prejean, Ryan Holcomb, Tyler Gray, Collin Lindrew, Sarah Nichols, Kendra Hendricks, Samantha Morgan, Serena Pandos, Colleen Rials, Marie Constantin, Mary Durusau, Dusty Bastion, Pam Bordelon, Luke Lognion, Robert Kidder, Kristen Guarisco, Molly Sanchez, Caroline Byrne, Brooke Goodrich, Gary Black, Chris Chandler, Anna Gasperecz, Michael Lang, John O. Hearin, Jasmine Thomas, Whitney Hoffman Sayal, Morgan Lewis, Casey Tate, Ute Cress.

1. Eric Dexter called the meeting to order and declared a quorum.
2. Mr. Eric Dexter made a motion to approve the agenda, requesting the addition of House Study Request No.1 by Representative Barbara Freiberg to the agenda. Melanie Montanaro seconded the motion and the motion was approved.
3. Scott Hensgens made a motion to approve the minutes from the April 11, meeting; Prescott Bailey seconded the motion, and the motion was approved.

Eric Dexter greeted everyone and thanked Adam Knapp with BRAC for hosting the meeting and asked Mr. Knapp if he would like to say a few words.

Mr. Knapp stated that BRAC and DDD are working collaboratively on a retail/storefront project for downtown. The first phase of the project is to identify vacant storefront opportunities for retail. The goal of the project is to try and recruit retailers, especially unique local retailers that will help to enhance the appeal and the destination nature of downtown. The project is expected to take most of the year. In the meantime, BRAC continues to do other work alongside DDD to advocate and work for the interest of downtown, particularly maintaining the momentum from the Canvas trip to Greenville, SC last year in October. The ideas that came out of that trip center around the density and quality of engagement downtown. Those who attended the trip formed into several different topic groups, one of those focusing on the riverfront and downtown.

4. Updates from previous Board meeting:

- **Strategic Plan** – Phillip LaFargue updated the Commission on the status of the DDD Strategic Plan. The planning process began with research to work together to merge stakeholder needs and perspectives with organizational priorities, to create a downtown plan that is rooted in understanding and empathy for our community. The first phase was discovery and stakeholder engagement to align the vision of the DDD with the desires and perspectives heard from stakeholders of downtown and the parish. The next phase was collaboration, where workshops were held to review and understand the outcome of the research to drive the 3-5 year vision. The last phase is underway and includes plan development, and refinement before the DDD Commission’s final adoption.

Mr. LaFargue stated approximately 1400 responded to a survey including, visitors, workers, residents, professional services, landlords/developers, and retail businesses. Round table discussions were held by three downtown groups: residents, businesses, and allied partners. The discussions were very successful, and a lot of excellent ideas were generated by the groups. Information from the survey and the round table discussions will be utilized in the strategic plan. Downtowns everywhere are shifting their focus to the residential market and based on the survey, 75% of residential respondents want more housing downtown and 40% of downtown workers want to live downtown.

Based on the survey, people who live near downtown have a greater affinity for downtown, they are also twice as likely to want:

- Safer pedestrian & cycling experiences
- More cultural events
- Better streetscape
- More art attractions

Another preliminary survey highlight was the perception of safety, even though statistically downtown is one of the safest parts of the parish, people don’t necessarily have the perception that it is a safe place. 92% of the downtown residents feel safe during the daytime and 42% feel safe at night while local visitors generally do not feel safe. DDD has been generating ideas for how to improve the overall perception and feeling of safety. The next steps are to have a final workshop and finalize the plan for adoption.

- **MOVEBR** – Jason Crain, MOVEBR Deputy Program Manager, updated the Commission on the status of the Florida Street ADA Compliance project. Mr. Crain reported on a new project, the South Boulevard Trailhead Connection, that was funded and approved by Metro Council earlier this year. The work will connect the existing South Boulevard & S. River Road over the railroad tracts to the levee trailhead and provide sidewalks and way-finding signage. This will increase the safety of pedestrians and bikers and provide access to existing trails and paths to the levee trail. Design procurement will begin in June and hopefully, by the second quarter of next year, construction will begin.

There are six ADA transition projects located downtown. The Florida Street area project is finishing up construction, the other 5 are in the preliminary design and planning phase.

Overall, the contractor, Triumph Construction, for the Florida Street ADA Compliance project has been doing a great job. They have been cooperative in scheduling construction around the Mardi Gras parades and coordinating with businesses to work around their schedule to reduce days of disruption. Whitney Hoffman Sayal stated the DDD Office has not received any complaints regarding the contractor and is excited about all the MOVEBR projects downtown. Ms. Hoffman Sayal expressed her appreciation to Councilwoman Carolyn Coleman for her support in the process of getting the funding for the South Boulevard Trailhead project approved.

To follow this project, go to www.movebr.brla.gov/FloridaADA, and for construction-related problems, call 311, 311.brla.gov, or the use 311 Red Stick app.

5. Governmental Issues:

- **HLS 23RS-754 – Representative Barbara Freiberg** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal introduced to the Commission HLS 23RS-754 presented by Representative Freiberg to request the House Committee on House and Governmental Affairs to meet and study the prevalence of remote work among state employees and to investigate the impact of such work on the local economy and to report its findings to the House of Representatives before January 8, 2024.
- **Atchafalaya National Heritage Grant (Heritage Markers on Downtown Riverfront)** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal briefed the Commission on the status of the grant. The grant was applied for a couple of years ago, however, it was tied up with all the transitioning of the office during COVID. The grant went before the Metro Council last week for approval which includes the Riverfront signage. Caroline Byrne, Assistant Director, Atchafalaya National Heritage Area at Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism stated their job is to promote and preserve unique cultural, natural, and recreational resources around the Atchafalaya Basin, which Baton Rouge is a part of due to the connection of the Mississippi River. They are excited to be working with DDD to expand the story of the river that will tell the whole water story of the region, especially for those riverboat visitors. This project will be about a year long. DDD is hoping to finalize getting a contract together for design and installation.
- **FUTUREBR** – Ryan Holcomb, Planning Director, updated the Commission. Mr. Holcomb stated FUTUREBR is the City Parish’s long-range comprehensive plan for EBR Parish. It includes all the jurisdiction in the Parish, outside of Baker, Central, and Zachary. FUTUREBR is a 20-year plan, adopted in late 2011 and took effect in early 2012, required to be updated every 5 years. The last update was adopted by Planning Commission and the Metro Council in 2018. The update was about a year and a half late due to the focus on the flood recovery. This is the second 5-year update of the comprehensive plan; about 50% of the goals and action items in the plan have been implemented. The Land Use map is the most recognized portion of the plan, breaking it into the 12 council districts with 33 lead agencies involved, including the DDD. Mr. Holcomb introduced two senior members of the Planning Commission staff, Mr. Jeffery Leuenberger, Planning Manager, and Jasmine Thomas, Senior Planner who have been working diligently on the plan. There will be a series of 9 community and parish-wide open houses from

June to September, including one downtown. The goal is to present the plan for adoption to the Planning Commission in November and to the Metro Council in either December or January. A community survey will be sent out with an introduction video and links to more info about the plan. There will be three final public meetings that will take place in late August or early September. For additional information visit the website at www.brla.gov/FUTUREBR-5-Year-Update.

6. Development Initiatives:

- **Placid Refining Co.** – Tyler Gray, Corporate Secretary/Director, Corporate and Government Affairs with Placid informed the Commission that Placid Refining just recently moved its headquarters from Dallas to Downtown Baton Rouge to 402 N 4th Street (former BRAF building). Placid is an independent, privately held petroleum refining company located in Port Allen, and will be celebrating its 50-year anniversary next year. Placid Refining produces and distributes a full range of transportation fuels across the Southeast from Texas to Maryland and is a vital supply source for a multitude of independent retailers and jobbers, for the US military, as well as a major emergency fuel supplier throughout Louisiana. The downtown office will house about 50 employees and provide a total of 108 new jobs in the capital region.
- **617 North Boulevard Update** – Michael Lang, managing principal, Key Real Estate, and John O. Hearin, BR Parking, updated the Commission on the status of the project at 617 North Boulevard. The Historic Preservation Commission recently approved the demolishing of the building on-site to build an apartment building. Mr. Lang stated downtown apartments in Central Business District have a high occupancy rate. This will be their second residential complex to be built; the first is the Heron, a 142-unit apartment development at the corner of Florida and Sixth Streets. The new building will be a “sister building” being similar in design and size with about 200 residential units, possibly with some retail and or live/work units on the first floor. In the next couple of months, the design drawings will be completed and bids will be requested from contractors to demolish the existing building. Whitney Hoffman Sayal stated there is a demand to live downtown and is excited about this development. Mr. Hearin stated the demographics for those living downtown, are older students, IBM workers, bankers, attorneys, young professionals, and older adults.
- **Belli** – Kristen Guarisco, owner of Belli, briefed the Commission. Ms. Guarisco stated she’s been a resident of Spanish Town for the past 3 years and her heart is so deeply rooted in the neighborhood, that when the grocery store closed, she bought it to revive it. She has a dietetics degree from LSU and started a healthy meal-prep business after college and evolved into being a private chef; she is also a health coach and yoga instructor. The menu will consist of coffee, breakfast options, snacks, a picnic basket and blanket date night rental, daily lunch specials, and frozen crockpot meals. There will be events held at Belli such as a jazz brunch, karaoke, yoga, cook-offs, cooking classes, wellness workshops, and lunch and learns. In addition, the walls will be filled with art from local artists. Plans are to be open by June.

- **LASM Dome Lighting** – Serena Pandos, LASM Executive Director, updated the Commission. LASM has been working on the full-color lighting of the dome of the Irene W. Pennington Planetarium since 2019 and is now completed. LED lights encircle the realm of the dome which can be programmed to cast about 30 different color schemes for holidays, special occasions, etc. The ambiance the lights bring to downtown and the view from the river is outstanding. Ms. Pandos stated they would like to thank the State, the LASM Board, and the Pennington and Lamar families. The grand unveiling will be right before the 38th Annual Gala on Friday, October 6, celebrating the 20-year anniversary of the Irene W. Pennington Planetarium.
- **Old State Capitol** – Mary Durusau, Old State Capitol Director, announced that AAA Magazine named the Old State Capitol “as one of 10 architectural wonders you have to see” in its March 14th issue. Exterior renovations are currently underway on the stairs leading from River Road including a new handrail. Funds have been requested from the State for additional exterior renovations. The Old State Capitol’s annual gala, “The Spirits of Louisiana”, will be held on October 26th. Ms. Durusau stated the Capitol free and is open to the public.

7. Events -

Casey Tate updated the Commission on the following events:

- Live After Five –
 - Friday, May 19th – The Michael Foster Project
 - Friday, May 26th – Press 1 for English
- Mary Bird Perkins – Live Well, Saturday, May 13, 9:00 AM – 1:00 PM, Spanish Town Road
- Soul Food Festival – May 20 – 21, Riverfront Plaza and Levee Stage
- Art of Wine – Half Price Wine and Art at Blend, Thursday, May 11 from 5:00 PM – 8:30 PM
- Walls Project – Legacies to Afrofutures – Benefit concert BR African American Museum, May 20
- Manship Theatre – Morgan James, May 23, 7:30 PM
- LSU MOA – “I, Too, Am Thornton Dial” Exhibition
- Capital Park Museum – Lunchtime Lagniappe, May 10, Free First Sunday, June 4
- Old State Capitol –
 - The Hidden History of Louisianan’s Jazz Age – Book Discussion, June 4
 - Jazz Age juxtaposition: Prohibition Era in Louisiana until August 19
 - Political Parties and the Culture of Conventions until December 15
- River Center – May Events
 - Kountry Wayne, Comedy, May 27, 7:30, Theatre for Performing Arts
 - Madagascar: The Musical, May 31, 7:00, Theatre for Performing Arts
- LASM –
 - BASF’s Kid’s Lab – Throughout May
 - Dinner Under the Stars – Thursday, May 13
 - Family Hour Stargazing – Every Saturday @ 10:00 AM
- USS. Kidd –
 - Operation Big Fish–June 6, 4-9 PM, Fishing & education provided by Wildlife & Fisheries
 - Open Daily 9:30 AM-3:30 PM
- Red Stick Farmer’s Market –Every Saturday 8:00-12:00 on the Corner of 5th and Main Streets
- Baton Rouge Arts Market – Every First Saturday of the Month, June 3

8. Commission Announcements & Updates:

- Whitney Hoffman Sayal stated there is now a downtown litter crew with a few individuals from the City-Parish Maintenance Department working to pick up trash. The DDD is working with the crew to identify areas that need attention and also define what litter is beyond trash, such as signs, posters on street signs, graffiti, etc.

9. Public Comment:

- Mary Durusau announced the Secretary of States Office is now operating the old Governor's Mansion located at 502 North Boulevard which is free and open for tours Monday – Friday 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM. It is a wonderful event venue to host rehearsal dinners and weddings. The website is <https://www.oldgovernorsmansion.com/>
- Marie Constantin, Stormwater Coalition, stated that Baton Rouge has a lot to offer and there are many “waterfalls” (in reference Greenville S.C. BRAC trip) to uncover. Capitol Lakes are a huge waterfall that will be an ecotourist destination in Baton Rouge with kayaking, trails, and interacting with the environment.
- Luke Lognion with BRASS mentioned there is an “Art of Wine” event – half-price wine and art at Blend this Thursday, May 11 from 5:00 PM – 8:30 PM. There will not be a Live After Five this week. Don't forget to shop local!
- Morgan Udoh with the Walls Project announced “Legacies to Afrofutures”- a benefit concert for the Baton Rouge African-American Museum on May 20, 6:00 PM – 9:00 PM at Chelsea's Live, 1010 Nicholson Drive. The goal of the event is to raise the matching fund of \$7,500 needed to produce three murals. Any remaining funds from the event will go toward the Museum. On Juneteenth, the museum will be moved from its current location to 805 St. Louis. This walk will help move artifacts from the old museum location to the new one, and ensure the preservation of African American history in Baton Rouge.
- Pam Bordelon with the Arts Council announced Thursday, May 11, from 5:30 PM – 7:30 PM at the Cary Saurage Arts Council a reception opening the Gary Thorton, “I, Too, Am Thornton Dial” Exhibition. The Derek Gordon & Rodolfo Ramirez-Rodriguez - A Collection Retrospective exhibit with 50-plus carefully curated pieces from the impressive collection will be in the Shell Gallery of the Cary Saurage Community Arts Center until May 31st.

10. Meeting Adjourned – Melanie Montanaro moved to adjourn the meeting, Scott Hensgens seconded the motion, and the meeting was adjourned.