

Built for 1947

Baton Rouge's Plan of Government is nearly 80 years old. Does it still hold up?

By Dillon Lowe



When East Baton Rouge Parish voters approved a consolidated city-parish government in the late 1940s, Baton Rouge was the parish's unquestioned center of gravity.

The surrounding areas were largely rural and unincorporated, and the logic behind unifying city and parish functions under a single government was relatively straightforward: Eliminate service duplication, increase efficiency and reduce costs.

Nearly eight decades later, the parish bears little resemblance to the one that embraced consolidation.

What exists today is a patchwork of increasingly independent municipalities. In addition to the city of Baton Rouge, the parish is home to Baker, Central, Zachary and now St. George, each with its own mayor, city council and approach to service delivery. The set of functions those cities rely on the parish for is ever narrowing. At the same time, the city-parish is facing mounting fiscal pressure as revenue shifts tied to St. George's incorporation shrink its general fund.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the current state of affairs has brought renewed scrutiny to the city-parish's foundational governing document, or Plan of Government. Adopted in 1947, the document lays out Baton Rouge's consolidated form of government, under which the city and the parish operate under a single mayor-president and council.

Among those at the heart of that discussion is District 3 Metro Council member Rowdy Gaudet, who believes now is the right time to revisit the Plan of Government and take a long, hard look at whether the current model still holds up.

While Gaudet says moving away from consolidation "shouldn't be off the table," he doesn't want to rush toward any single reform. Instead, he'd like to see officials begin the review process with an open mind, seeking to answer one fundamental question.

"The ultimate question is, with the current structure of what is unincorporated area and what is city of Baton Rouge, what kind of government would best serve that," Gaudet says. "Maybe it's the current kind of government, and maybe it's something different."

A BYGONE ERA

Since it was first adopted in 1947, the Plan of Government has been amended numerous times. While city and parish functions were consolidated from the start, city and parish councils were separate until a major revision in the 1980s combined them, forming the Metro Council. Other amendments have adjusted executive authority, departmental organization and various governance procedures.

Through it all, the core premise of consolidation—that a consolidated government is a more efficient way to run a metropolitan area—has remained intact. For Gaudet and others now calling for a review, it's unclear whether that premise still reflects reality.

Cornerstone Government Affairs principal Nial Patel is blunt in his assessment of the situation.

“The 1947 Plan of Government was a pioneering document for its time,” Patel says, “but it was written in a world that didn’t know the internet, modern civil rights or the complex regional dynamics we face today. A document nearly 80 years old cannot effectively address the needs of a 2026 society. I fully support a comprehensive review.”

Patel argues the issue isn’t simply whether Baton Rouge should remain consolidated but whether city-parish government is designed to operate like a modern, high-performing organization rather than a “political machine.”

Among the Plan of Government revisions he believes should be explored is an update to the city-parish’s management structure. More specifically, he thinks Baton Rouge would do well to consider introducing an apolitical city-parish manager who would focus solely on running day-to-day operations efficiently, as many other local governments across the country have done. Previous attempts to introduce the role in Baton Rouge have failed at the ballot box.

“I am in constant communication with citizens who feel the current system is stalled,” Patel says. “There is a growing consensus that we are missing opportunities. We should be asking, ‘Why aren’t we the benchmark for the region?’ We should have the highest-paid, best-equipped police force in the state, seamless public transportation and infrastructure—from streetlights to sewers—that actually works. Our zoning and building codes should invite growth, not stifle it. We should have a vibrant riverfront and clean neighborhoods.”

But before officials commit to as sweeping a reform as deconsolidation, Patel says the city-parish must first conduct a thorough analysis of its finances, identifying exactly which parts of the parish pay for exactly which services.

Only then, he says, can officials make informed decisions about whether change should come through surgical amendments to the Plan of Government or through a full repeal and rewrite of the document.

“I propose engaging a trusted third-party partner—perhaps the state—to provide a clear accounting of parishwide constitutional services versus municipal ones,” Patel says. “We must identify who is paying for what and where that money is going.”

That’s a point both Gaudet and St. George Mayor Dustin Yates agree with. Yates says it makes sense to review the Plan of Government given how much has changed since 1947

but that any effort to modernize the document must be rooted in “facts, not assumptions.”

“That starts with financial literacy and transparency, including a clear, public understanding of revenues and expenses and how they align with services and responsibilities across the parish,” Yates says. “With a shared set of facts, all the communities in the parish can collaborate in an open-minded way and evaluate any reforms based on what improves service delivery, accountability and fairness to taxpayers.”

Central Mayor Wade Evans, for his part, does not view deconsolidation as inherently beneficial or problematic for his city.

Since its incorporation in 2005, Central has gradually built out its own operations and entered into service agreements with the parish where necessary—something St. George is now in the process of doing.

Evans isn’t eager to rush toward wholesale structural upheaval. Uncoupling Baton Rouge from the parish, he says, would raise immediate and complicated questions: How would assets be divided? How would constitutional offices be funded? And how, if at all, would existing service agreements be renegotiated?

“I support looking into the pros and cons,” Evans says. “When you uncouple the parish from Baton Rouge proper, it creates logistical issues as it relates to status quo service delivery. ... There are more questions than answers at this point for me to have an opinion either way.”

It’s worth noting that city-parish consolidations (called city-county consolidations elsewhere in the country) are quite rare. While the precise number of consolidated governments across the U.S. is difficult to specify because of conflicting definitions in different parts of the country, the National League of Cities puts the number somewhere around 40.

In Louisiana, there are four consolidated city-parish governments: Baton Rouge, Lafayette, New Orleans and Terrebonne.

A CASE STUDY

Gaudet says he's already begun researching other governmental models in Louisiana and what they might mean for Baton Rouge, and one parish in particular has drawn his attention: Lafayette.

Like Baton Rouge, Lafayette operates under a consolidated city-parish government. And like Baton Rouge, Lafayette has grappled in recent years with questions about whether a consolidated model is still in its best interest.

Unlike Baton Rouge, however, Lafayette acted.

In 2018, voters approved a restructuring that split the city-parish's previously unified nine-member council into two separate five-member bodies, one governing the city of Lafayette and one governing Lafayette Parish. The move stopped short of full deconsolidation but nevertheless represented a significant recalibration.

After consolidating in 1996, Lafayette maintained separate legal entities for the city and the parish but operated under a single mayor-president and council. Some council members were elected from within city limits; others were elected from elsewhere in the parish. All voted on both city and parish matters.

The hybrid council structure meant parish representatives had a say over city finances and city representatives had a say over parish finances—a dynamic that Patrick Ottinger, Lafayette's city-parish attorney, says fueled numerous controversies over the years.

"Over time, this created confusion or lack of clarity as to budgetary issues and fiscal responsibility," Ottinger says, especially when responsibilities weren't easily identifiable as city or parish functions.

Several earlier attempts at broader deconsolidation failed. But 2018's narrower proposal won voter approval, in part because it was easier for voters to understand.

The reform did not eliminate every gray area. Questions remain about how certain parish functions should be funded, particularly as municipalities continue to annex previously unincorporated land and shrink the tax base available to the parish. Still, Ottinger views the council split as a pragmatic improvement.

"The result," Ottinger says, "was that the demarcation lines between financial responsibilities became much more clear and precise. ... There's a great advantage in

having that clarity. The city purely governs city matters without parish influence and vice versa.”

So, why does this matter for Baton Rouge?

On the most basic level, Lafayette’s experience shows that “deconsolidation”—still something of a touchy term in the Capital City—is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Lafayette did not dismantle its consolidated government entirely. Instead, it presented a smaller, easier-to-digest proposal that voters felt would move both the city and the parish in the right direction.

But the Lafayette example also highlights the importance of objective financial auditing in the deconsolidation conversation.

Lafayette’s reform required officials to closely examine where taxes were levied and how funds were allocated—an exercise Gaudet, Patel and Yates all agree Baton Rouge must undertake before pursuing changes to its own governmental model.

“I do think that becomes a significant stress point in any conversation about deconsolidation,” Ottinger says.

WHAT COMES NEXT

If Baton Rouge does amend its Plan of Government, Gaudet is adamant about one thing: It won’t happen overnight.

In his view, any serious effort to revise the document must begin not with a predetermined outcome but with extensive data gathering and public engagement. The latter will require a high degree of public education.

Ultimately, voters need to approve any changes to the Plan of Government. A set of amendments to the document proposed in 2024—some minor, some major—were rejected. That result, according to Gaudet, can be attributed at least in part to the complexity of the document and the lack of public familiarity with its provisions.

“Frankly, a large portion of the public is not familiar with the Plan of Government,” Gaudet says. “It’s not something they’re engaging with in their day-to-day lives.”

The process, he says, will likely unfold in phases: financial analysis, comparative research, input from municipal leaders, meetings with the community and, only once that groundwork is laid, a proposal presented to voters. Gaudet anticipates at least some movement on the issue in 2026.

“It is not my intent to rush this process in any way,” Gaudet says.

URL: <https://www.businessreport.com/business/baton-rouge-city-parish-plan-review>