

# Can Mayor Edwards' vision for Baton Rouge endure when his budget is shrinking?

By Dillon Lowe



On the campaign trail, Sid Edwards spoke in the language of possibility. A longtime football coach and political outsider, he pitched himself as a leader willing to challenge business as usual.

He promised progress on blight, safer streets and a better quality of life, arguing that Baton Rouge's problems were not unsolvable, just poorly managed. He had the confidence of a coach convinced his playbook was sound.

A year later, with his first year in office in the books, Edwards finds himself governing under far tighter constraints than he inherited. Voters rejected his tax proposal. Revenue is shrinking. Hundreds of positions are on the chopping block. The mayor who

campaigned on bold reform is now tasked with delivering tangible results using fewer resources than his predecessors had at their disposal.

When Edwards discusses what his second year in office might look like, he does so under no illusions about the challenges that lie ahead.

"Any time you have a reduction in force, there's going to be an impact," Edwards says.

Yet rather than wringing his hands, the mayor is framing the moment as an opportunity to build a leaner, more modern and more efficient city hall.

"I guess it's the way I'm built," Edwards says. "Some people may be concerned about this, and I am to a degree, but to be honest, I'm more excited than I am concerned. We like solving problems."

## DOING MORE WITH LESS

The mayor's resolve will quickly be put to the test. On Dec. 9, the Metro Council approved a pared-down 2026 budget that slashes funding for nearly every department of city-parish government and sets the stage for widespread layoffs. The cuts cloud the optimism that was central to his campaign.

The budget slashes funding for most departments by about 11% and calls for a general fund workforce reduction of 33%. Some 200 positions will be eliminated through a combination of layoffs, early retirements and forgoing the filling of vacant positions, and another 220 positions will be deleted. The cuts were necessitated by the incorporation of St. George, which brings with it a loss of \$50 million in revenue over two years.

District 3 Metro Council member Rowdy Gaudet says public works are among his primary areas of concern. Services like drainage, grass cutting and road maintenance are highly visible, he says, and residents will notice even modest slowdowns in delivery.

"When you take on drastic budget cuts at such a rapid pace, you do have to expect some service interruptions," Gaudet says. "I'm not pulling any alarms, but I'm not telling residents to expect no service interruptions whatsoever. There will be an adjustment period."

To mitigate the damage, Gaudet says the Metro Council plans to maintain open lines of communication with residents, the mayor's office and individual department heads over

the course of the next year to monitor service delivery and make course corrections as needed.

"We're going to continuously revisit this throughout 2026," he says.

Edwards, for his part, says his team is actively looking for creative ways to stretch capacity. That includes expanding the use of private contractors, exploring new technologies and identifying any and all opportunities to streamline processes, whether through artificial intelligence or simple workflow adjustments.

When it comes to public works, among the ideas under consideration are contracting out certain maintenance tasks and exploring emerging tech already being used by municipalities elsewhere in the nation. On the former point, Edwards says he'll attend a seminar in February on robotic lawn mowers—not a silver bullet, but an example of the kind of out-of-the-box thinking the moment demands.

"Everything is on the table," Edwards says. "We're not going to sit still."

Edwards' Thrive EBR tax proposal would have gone a long way toward stabilizing city-parish finances, [but voters rejected that proposal at the ballot box in November](#). Still, when asked whether he believes he'll be able to deliver on his campaign promises despite Thrive's failure and the resulting cuts, Edwards responds with an emphatic "yes."

"I 100% believe that," he says. "Certainly, it would've been easier if Thrive had passed. But there are so many different ways to get where we want to go."

## COACH SID'S ROOKIE YEAR

Though Edwards acknowledges the challenges posed by the cuts, he points to measurable first-year progress as proof that his administration can deliver even with limited resources.

Blight enforcement, he says, is one area where he's been able to accomplish much with meager manpower. In his first year, the city-parish demolished more than 200 blighted properties with just a four-person crew. More equipment and more staff could have brought that number "closer to 500," but even so, 2025 was a banner year.

"We quadrupled the demolitions," Edwards says. "They took down 49 in 2024, and we're at 201, which is the largest number of blighted properties torn down in a single year in the history of East Baton Rouge Parish."

The mayor describes that success as a proof of concept—evidence that intentional, targeted approaches to tough, long-standing issues can move the needle even when staffing constraints are pronounced.

Public safety, he says, is another area where considerable progress has been made over the course of the past year despite persistent workforce challenges. The Baton Rouge Police Department has for years been grappling with an officer shortage that he says is largely the result of low starting pay.

To inform his strategy on crime, an issue signature to his campaign, Edwards convened a public safety transition committee chaired by Assistant Chief Administrative Officer and former BRPD Chief Jeff LeDuff and co-chaired by Cornerstone Government Affairs principal Nial Patel. He says his administration has acted on every single recommendation that came out of that committee, from breaking down silos between law enforcement agencies to launching the Office of Violence Prevention to oversee data-driven intervention efforts. Violent crime is now trending downward across almost every category, with the city-parish in 2025 recording its lowest number of homicides since 2019.

"The severity of the crisis was met with decisive action," Patel says in a statement, "and we are already seeing the benefits."

BRPD and the Baton Rouge Fire Department were the only two departments left unscathed by the recent budget cuts.

Not all is smooth sailing with regard to public safety, however. Also tied up in the issue are the district attorney's office and the public defender's office, which respectively face an 11% cut and a 21.4% cut. District Attorney Hillar Moore has gone so far as to suggest he might [sue the city-parish over the cut to his office's funding](#), as state law requires the city-parish to provide a "reasonable and necessary" level of funding to constitutional offices like his.

"It's not fun to do it, but it may be that, regardless, I just have to do it," Moore said in November.

Edwards says he believes Moore's argument does have legs, and that he sees the proposed legal action as an unfortunate but navigable consequence of a strained budget rather than a breakdown of relations between the two parties.

"I'd view it as a friendly lawsuit, if it comes to that," Edwards says. "Nobody wants to be in that position, but these are issues that have been there for a long time, and now we're having to deal with them."

Beyond blight and crime, Edwards says his administration has made progress on infrastructure, advancing or completing a slate of road and sidewalk projects, as well as homelessness, [the area he says his team has been able to move the needle furthest on](#).

## A PARISH IN PIECES

Edwards' challenge heading into 2026 is further complicated by the reality that Baton Rouge is no longer the center of gravity for East Baton Rouge Parish that it once was.

As the parish's footprint fractures into increasingly independent municipalities, the fiscal pain of city-parish government is being felt unevenly. Cities like Central and St. George have largely insulated themselves from the cuts rippling through Baton Rouge, a contrast that underscores how much has changed since the city-parish's consolidated form of government was put in place decades ago.

Central Mayor Wade Evans puts it bluntly. His city, he says, already provides most core services internally and relies little on parish government. As a result, the cuts and layoffs now facing Baton Rouge are unlikely to materially affect day-to-day life in Central.

"The mayor and I are very close, and Sid is doing a great job, but the city of Central doesn't need him to do anything for us," Evans says. "We take care of everything in our city ourselves."

Evans is sympathetic to constitutional officers who argue that funding cuts threaten their ability to function but outspoken in his criticism of the parish's long-term fiscal management. He views the budget crisis as an unfortunate consequence of years of poor resource allocation.

"The parish was run haphazardly for many years, and they didn't spend sales tax dollars properly on roads and ditches, which forced cities like Central and St. George to do their own thing," Evans says. "Now, the sales tax dollars aren't there. They owe it to the

citizens of this parish to fix their government machine. And I think that's where Sid is at. He's realizing that it's not going to be pretty to fix it, but we're not elected to do pretty stuff."

In St. George, Mayor Dustin Yates assesses the situation similarly. His city has spent the past year standing up its own public works, planning and permitting operations, leaving only a select few services, such as animal control, sewage and traffic signalization, in the hands of the parish.

Because those services are contract based, Yates says St. George has options if service quality slips.

"We're paying for a service," Yates says, "so if the service is no longer adequate at some point in time, we would obviously do the smart thing and look to contract with another company or organization that could provide the same service. I don't have a whole lot of concerns about this."

That dynamic—cities acting more like customers than constituents—is a consequential one. As Baton Rouge tightens its belt, other municipalities are increasingly charting their own courses, further shrinking the city-parish's revenue base and operational reach.

That's why Gaudet says the current budget woes could very well present an opportunity to rethink how city-parish government functions on a grand scale.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with taking a step back and saying, 'OK, the structure of our government was established over 30 years ago, and over the years, things have changed,'" Gaudet says. "We now have four municipalities in addition to the city of Baton Rouge. I don't think there's anything wrong with reviewing our plan of government and seeing if any improvements can be made there."

## THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

For all the attention paid to the 2026 budget, one local analyst says its long-term political significance may depend less on the cuts themselves and more on what follows.

John Couvillon, president of JMC Analytics and Polling, notes that while budget cuts and layoffs are rarely popular, Edwards benefits from timing. With his reelection campaign still years away, the mayor has room to absorb the political fallout—provided he can point to tangible improvements by the end of his first term.

Couvillon contends that voters are unlikely to audit Edwards' campaign platform line by line. Instead, they'll judge his tenure more broadly, asking themselves whether Baton Rouge feels cleaner, safer and better run than it did before he took office.

That places Edwards in a narrow, hugely consequential window. The cuts he's now navigating may be survivable, but what comes next will determine how his first term is ultimately remembered.

"If you're going to do something unpleasant, it's better to do it early," Couvillon says. "The real test comes later, when voters ask what changed."

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