

What will the River Center's redevelopment mean for Baton Rouge?

By Dillon Lowe



It's no secret that the Raising Cane's River Center is poised for a major overhaul—one that could redefine how Baton Rouge competes for conventions, visitors and entertainment dollars in the years ahead.

The plan, prompted in part by the proposed development of LSU's new \$400 million arena just 2 miles away, is to redevelop the complex to cater primarily to conventions and construct an adjacent headquarters hotel. Baton Rouge is one of the largest cities in the country to lack a full-fledged convention center.

But while early headlines suggested that the River Center might pivot almost entirely away from live entertainment in favor of conventions, one local leader involved in the project says that's a bit of a misread.

"We're not trying to take anything away from anyone," Jill Kidder, president and CEO of Visit Baton Rouge, tells *Daily Report*. "We want to grow the pie and be smart about how we grow the pie."

According to Kidder, who serves as vice chair of the project's oversight committee, the intent is to "right-size" the River Center's role as an entertainment venue in light of LSU's arena plans. To facilitate the development of that arena, the Metro Council last year passed a noncompete ordinance restricting the River Center's live entertainment events to 3,500 attendees for the next 30 years. Hockey has a separate attendance cap of 8,500.

The River Center would continue to host mid-size performances, participatory sports tournaments and Baton Rouge Zydeco games in addition to conventions and meetings, while LSU's new arena would host large-scale performances and LSU sporting events.

Some downtown businesses have [raised questions about how the River Center's repositioning might hurt their bottom lines](#), but Laura Cating, Visit Baton Rouge's senior vice president of marketing and communications, says the move actually has the potential to bring more consistent economic activity to the area. While the facility's current live entertainment programming might boost business on Fridays and Saturdays, major conventions distribute that activity across entire weeks or months.

To support that notion, Cating points to the ongoing 2025 United States Bowling Congress Open Championships, a months-long competition being hosted by the River Center that has been filling downtown hotels, bars and restaurants since it kicked off in March.

"We want to see seven-day-a-week business," Cating says. "Conventions and meetings are one way to get there. But that doesn't mean downtown entertainment goes away."

Two separate studies conducted in recent years have shown that Baton Rouge risks falling behind its peer cities sans a refreshed convention space and an adjacent headquarters hotel, Kidder says.

"Many of [our peer cities] have done this five years ago or more," she says. "They're leapfrogging us. That's a major concern."

Hunden Partners, an international real estate development advisory firm headquartered in Chicago, is poised to become the project's "owner's adviser," pending a Metro Council

vote. In that role, Hunden will guide next steps before working to attract potential developers. If all goes according to plan, a request for proposal—a formal solicitation for development bids—will be issued within a year. Kidder is hopeful that the project, likely to be funded through a public-private partnership, will be completed by 2031 or 2032. Hunden is also advising LSU on the development of its arena, [per media reports](#).

The River Center project is being framed as a key anchor of Plan Baton Rouge III, downtown Baton Rouge's new master plan. While the recommendations that come out of that plan will inevitably take years if not decades to see through, the River Center project could help give the plan early momentum.

"It's exciting to look forward and vision cast, but at the same time, it's also difficult to look that far forward without having a couple of anchor projects that you can physically see getting done," Cating says. "The River Center is one of those projects."

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