

Baton Rouge 3.0

Downtown Baton Rouge is evolving once again. Here's how.

By Dillon Lowe



When Whitney Hoffman Sayal took the helm of the [Downtown Development District](#) in June 2022, she had big shoes to fill.

She was taking over for Davis Rhorer, the so-called Godfather of Downtown, who died of complications from COVID-19 in March 2021. Rhorer had led the DDD since its inception in 1987, and he's credited for helping bring Baton Rouge's urban core back from the brink.

At the time of the DDD's creation, urban sprawl had been stifling downtown growth and development for decades. Rhorer was determined to reverse that trend. He helped attract billions of investment dollars over the course of his tenure, all with the goal of

turning downtown into the epicenter of a “24-hour city.” The skyline filled in; the sidewalks became more active.

“Davis was a visionary,” Hoffman Sayal says, “and I’d like to consider myself a visionary as well. We can see everything that we want downtown to be, and we’re very passionate about it.”

Since assuming the role of executive director, Hoffman Sayal has worked to preserve Rhorer’s legacy while also crafting her own.

One of her first priorities, she says, was simply “reestablishing the office.” When she took over, the DDD had only two staff members and no active strategic plan. She grew the team to five and developed the DDD’s first new strategic plan in more than a decade.

Also under Hoffman Sayal, 24-hour police presence was established; new tools like Placer.ai were adopted to better track foot traffic and inform event strategy; and digital outreach efforts were significantly expanded, among other developments. At press time, the DDD was managing some 42 projects, many of which stalled upon Rhorer’s death but are now back on track.

Still, challenges linger. While progress has been made, perceptions about safety—especially at night—continue to affect how people engage with downtown. Debate stirs over what can be done to attract new residents and visitors in the years ahead. And many in the community feel that the city center remains largely isolated from the rest of Baton Rouge.

On the issue of public perception, the DDD is currently working with the city-parish on lighting upgrades that Hoffman Sayal says will make downtown feel safer and more welcoming after hours, and the aforementioned 24-hour police presence should add some degree of comfort. But the broader task of making downtown a more attractive place to live, work and play will require a larger, more ambitious approach.

Enter Plan Baton Rouge III.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Downtown Baton Rouge’s first two master plans—Plan Baton Rouge I in 1998 and Plan Baton Rouge II in 2009—paid dividends. They led to some \$3 billion in investment, and more than 80% of their proposals have now become reality. Some of the most

transformative developments to come out of the plans are the Shaw Center for the Arts, the Hilton Baton Rouge Capitol Center, Rhorer Plaza, Main Street Market and the Downtown Greenway.

Now, city leaders are looking to keep that momentum going.

Plan Baton Rouge III is a partnership of the DDD, the city-parish, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, the [Baton Rouge Area Foundation](#) and [Visit Baton Rouge](#). [Sasaki](#), an international planning and design firm, has been tapped to develop the master plan. The planning process kicked off in February, and a final plan is expected to be delivered in Q1 2026.

According to BRAF President and CEO Chris Meyer, the strength of that final plan will lie in its emphasis on action, not just ideation. BRAF is Plan Baton Rouge III's fiscal agent and coordinating entity.

"What we love about this is that the plan that's delivered in the end is a 'day-one' plan," Meyer says. "That means we've already got specific sites in mind. That means we have specific partners in mind who could develop those specific sites. That means we have funding streams identified. All of that is going to be baked into the plan."

To guide the plan's development, Sasaki is gathering input from the community through in-person events and online surveys. While the recommendations that come out of the plan will be wide-reaching, three key focus areas have already emerged from meetings with relevant stakeholders and engagement with the public.

First, there's the riverfront.

Baton Rouge has sat on the bank of the Mississippi River for centuries, but many in the community feel that the Red Stick hasn't done enough to capitalize on its status as a riverfront city. Joshua Brooks, the Sasaki principal leading Plan Baton Rouge III, says the river is far and away one of Baton Rouge's most underutilized assets.

"The riverfront is such a huge opportunity and one that is very missed," Brooks says. "Baton Rouge could have an incredible waterfront experience, and it doesn't."

Unlike other river cities like Cincinnati or Chicago, where bustling commercial areas, green spaces and promenades line the water, Baton Rouge's riverfront remains fragmented and, in some cases, difficult to access. Railroad tracks, River Road traffic and

the levee itself constitute barriers that discourage both locals and visitors—as well as investors—from engaging with the river in meaningful ways.

Though nothing is set in stone, Brooks, a Baton Rouge native, sees potential for a new kind of civic space downtown—one that could bring together dining, retail and cultural activity, all with a front-row view of the Mississippi.

It should be noted that this isn't the first time riverfront revitalization has been attempted. In the late 2000s, then-Mayor Kip Holden pushed for the downtown ALIVE project, a levee-side "interactive adventure" that was to be developed in partnership with the Audubon Nature Institute. Plans called for an aquarium, an outdoor concert amphitheater, interactive nature exhibits and more. But on two separate occasions voters rejected the tax proposals that would have brought the project to life.

"It's time to really think critically about what can happen on and along the waterfront to really reorient downtown to the river," Brooks says.

Bolstering residential growth is another priority. While downtown has seen its residential population grow by about 25% over the past 10 years, Hoffman Sayal says that pace of growth has begun to taper off as construction costs have risen.

"My hope is that this plan will recommend some different incentives and tools that we can use to help spur construction," she says.

While Brooks describes the downtown office market as "pretty strong," he says the central business district lacks the residential population necessary to become what he calls a "central neighborhood district." He points to neighborhoods like Beauregard Town and Spanish Town as examples of what downtown living could look like, and he sees plenty of room to introduce similar housing options without having to drastically alter the area's existing feel.

"There's a real possibility that the residential population could double, triple or even more than that without really needing to grow to any sort of Manhattan-like level of density," Brooks says.

Finally, there's the issue of connectivity to the rest of Baton Rouge. Many of the corridors that connect downtown to places like Mid City, the Garden District, LSU and Southern University are poorly lit and difficult to navigate on foot or bike, though a recent project

connecting the Downtown Greenway to Government Street's bike lanes provides some relief on the Mid City front.

"We're actually so close to LSU and to the Garden District, but we feel so far away because there are these gaps between us," Hoffman Sayal says.

Sasaki is looking at ways to improve connectivity and thereby create a more cohesive urban landscape. What the firm will ultimately recommend remains to be seen.

"Identifying priority corridors and identifying ways to create a more fluid connection between downtown and its surrounding areas is something the community has asked for," Brooks says, "and it's certainly something we'll be focused on."

While not one of the master plan's three main pillars, the repositioning of the Raising Cane's River Center is being framed as a key anchor project of Plan Baton Rouge III.

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

Visit Baton Rouge President and CEO Jill Kidder, who serves as vice chair of the project's oversight committee, says the redevelopment will help Baton Rouge keep pace with its peer cities. She hopes the project can be completed by 2031 or 2032.

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

BRAF is raising the money to cover Sasaki's technical work and its community engagement efforts—about \$1 million, Meyer says. Individual projects that emerge from Plan Baton Rouge III will likely rely on a mix of public and private funds.

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