



# CENTRAL SDAT

Creating Louisiana's Newest City

A Sustainable Design  
Assessment Team Report

**Central, Louisiana**  
**April 16–18, 2007**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the result of an AIA Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT) visit to Central, La., in April 2007. During a series of roundtable charrettes with community members, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were identified and a vision for the future discussed. This report summarizes those discussions and provides recommendations for achieving that vision based on the areas we were asked to study.

“Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are.”

*Anonymous*

“Show me your city, and I will tell you what the cultural aims of its population are.”

*Eliel Saarinen*

### Overall Analysis

Although the current pressures—sprawl development, traffic congestion, reduced housing affordability for younger residents—evident in Central today are common to any town or city across America, the city is in its embryonic stage, with the enviable position of having a nearly clean slate and the ability and the public support to shape its own future. With a sustainable vision for the future, decisions made today by city residents will have the capacity to sustain and nourish future inhabitants for many generations to come.

The collective vision for Central is founded on a sense of history and tradition; the strength of a caring, devout community; a priority commitment to quality schools and education; and an appreciation for rural Louisiana’s natural beauty, with some of the largest trees in the state. Central has taken bold steps to become the master of its own destiny; now it will need to be just as bold in translating that vision into a physical reality.

### Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are developed in more detail in each section of the report.

#### *Natural Resources*

To protect its natural resources and inhabitants a two-fold “design with nature” approach is required. Action items should include the restoration of natural floodways, an increase in natural vegetative cover and vegetative swales along roadways, and a reduction in the extent of impermeable surfaces and building development footprint in all new construction.

Supporting and allowing for the natural processes present in a floodplain will mitigate the level of unpredictability of severe storms. A land-use master plan should protect flood-prone areas from further development and support sustainable restorative development strategies in developable areas. Sustainable stormwater management will be critical to Central's future. This report makes three critical recommendations to address Central's current conditions:

- Develop a floodplain mitigation plan
- Implement sustainable development strategies
- Protect valued scenic and cultural sites

### *Transportation*

Central is delineated by water on most of its boundaries; therefore, existing bridges and roadways characterize the gateway experience into the city from most directions. As Central's name implies, many roads lead to or through the city, creating congestion that is bad today and expected to get worse as the city grows. This report presents three primary recommendations to effectively address congestion and support the city's desire to maintain quality neighborhoods without stifling or preventing economic growth:

- Develop a set of near- and long-term transportation improvements
- Partner with existing initiatives to tailor current and future roadway designs to match Central's vision, specifically matching land-use types
- Develop an implementation plan

These recommendations also present a wonderful opportunity to give the city a unique "signature" character as these gateways are one's first contact with the city.

### *Planning, Land Use, and Livability*

Historically cities grow organically from a small settlement to a greater urban center for some or all of the following reasons: sociocultural, religious, political, or economic necessity. For Central the desire to maintain control of its education system and preserve traditional values became the driving impetus for autonomy. As growth is inevitable, the city will feel the pressure to increase its tax base to provide desired amenities. The following recommendations will support the need for growth without compromising the values of the community:

- Create a sense of place through a defined “downtown triangle”
- Balance jobs and housing in downtown
- Adopt zoning and subdivision regulations
- Create a set of design standards for downtown

### *Schools and Education*

The desire to control the quality of Central’s schools is the driving force that created the city. As the city continues to maintain its student focus, it has the opportunity to become a significant leader in education in the state. This will attract new residents to the city, requiring a strategy to address increased enrollment. The following recommendations should be Central’s priority:

“Sustainability—Meet the needs of the future without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”

*U.N. Commission of Environment  
(Bruntland Commission, 1984)*

- Address the physical needs of the current school building inventory
- Evaluate the location and placement of the elementary and upper schools
- Adopt best practices for all new construction
- Set aside land for future neighborhood elementary schools

### *Community Livability and Sustainability*

Preserving a rural lifestyle with needed economic growth will require a delicate balancing act. The following recommendations will help Central grow over time without betraying its roots:

- Create a sense of place, reinforcing the idea of Central as a sanctuary
- Foster the development of a Central vernacular—landscape and architectural
- Embrace livable community strategies and incorporate them into the zoning bylaws
- Provide housing affordability for all household types and age groups
- Consider “passive survivability” as a design criteria for all municipal buildings
- Ensure economic development above all is sustainable

## THE SUSTAINABILITY STORY

Here's a story that shows one way the concept of sustainability in community planning works. In the mid-1990s a senior graduates from Central High School. He's interested in education. After graduation he relocates to New Orleans and enrolls at a university to undertake a degree program, which he finishes four years later. While working on his master's degree and a certification to teach public school in his field, an adviser helps him search for places to work in Louisiana. One day an extraordinary opportunity appears: as luck would have it, the position for which he's trained so diligently opens at Central High.

At his interview with the principal, he's delighted to find he is still remembered as a talented, serious student and a former school booster. He's a natural for the job. Sure, he may have some unusual ideas about how to go about teaching his subjects but who would be a better opportunity for the community than this young man? He's obviously already applied himself and takes his career seriously. Over the next seven years, this young but talented teacher sharpens his teaching skills, proves his abilities, and wins over students and parents with the attention and high expectations he brings to his craft. Where he once could have been mistaken for a student, he notices he's developed a voice of authority that he can use with integrity in many different situations. He can discipline students because he has their respect, and he can speak convincingly to parents and administration of how to improve the lives of students, even when there are tough choices to be made. Besides his subject, one thing he surely knows is how schools and education worked positively in his own life.

He meets his fiancée in Baton Rouge, where he lives. They've discussed starting a family, building on the security of his successful teaching career in Central. Soon it will be time to buy a house. Inevitable questions arise: What can they afford? How far will their salaries go toward buying a dream home in Central, compared to the Baton Rouge apartments they rent? How much worse will traffic become for him, reverse-commuting to Central from his place near Louisiana State University, compared to driving the mile or so from a new planned development in the city? What amenities are nearby in Central? Does he agree with the city's plans as it prepares to ask for taxes that will make possible the next generation of school facilities? He hears there is a plan to integrate the new high school with a community performing arts center, a town hall meeting place, and the new walkable retail district nearby. He occasionally runs into parents and students from the new city center mixed-use area while taking care of business at city hall. He knows all about the riverwalk and bike trails the city and the Recreation

and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge (BRAC) have created along the Amite River, which are one of his fiancée’s favorite places to spend a Sunday afternoon after church. He’s considered helping a friend start a business in Central, and he’s researched how the planning commission reviews and approves applications.

Sustainability affects his decision to move to Central. The city’s smart plan for transformation and good management of its challenges that began years ago are finally bringing it all home. What once may have appeared like a string of unusually conservative decisions by the community, mixed with a few extraordinarily bold, ahead-of-their-time decisions, now fall effortlessly into place. It’s true that our teacher may not stay in Central for the rest of his teaching career but along the way the decision for him not to do so has become more difficult. Central believed in him, and he’s finding the means to pass on the favor. Sustainability shows up in his decision, and his decision echoes and reinforces the unfolding pattern of success in the schools and the city.

Passing on the “good life” to others begins with the simple idea of paying attention to what really works. But knowing what seems to work now may be subtly and perhaps deceptively different from knowing what will really work in the long run. When it comes to planning a city, there is no simple predictive formula that will identify and guarantee the appropriate sustainable patterns that will work everywhere. In the midst of changing conditions that are driven by statewide reactions to natural disaster, by the many opportunities and challenges afforded by new technology, and by waves of economic forces that are reaching across the oceans before they lap at Central’s doorsteps, the uncertainties are real. The challenge to planners is all the more daunting when one realizes how those social and economic forces often interact in subtle ways, creating strong motives and incentives where none existed before, and creating confusion where oftentimes generations-old patterns obviously can no longer hold.

But there are patterns that will survive and that will continue to be shaped by underlying ideas that work in the long run. One of these is the concept of community in its deepest, most caring sense. And people who have held on to this idea all along, or who are rediscovering or reinventing it in its latest, most up-to-date forms, are teaching themselves to know it when they see it. They are recognizing its power in their social arrangements, in their self-governing, and in their efforts to plan for their neighbor’s families, for the community’s children, and for their own interests. This is all connected to that sense of service and living “the good life.” They energize it when members of the community learn to place their faith in each other the way that school principal did in that young student who returned as a teacher. The pattern continues when the teacher returns that faith with service to his community, strengthening it, making it better,

finding himself with responsibility to express it as one informed voice among many, helping to pass on a tradition that's tied to the place that is loved, valued, and that its people are willing to work to protect. The community steers this process as they tell this story to themselves. We're telling it to each other right now.

The first part of this story, up until the meeting of the fiancée, is true. How the rest turns out depends on Central.

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2006 Central, La., submitted a proposal to the AIA for an SDAT to assist the town and its citizens in addressing key issues facing the community. The issues included creating an identity for the newly incorporated city, preserving the city's rural lifestyle and beauty, developing a response to increasing pressures of development and traffic congestion, and addressing the ongoing threat of natural hazards and flooding. The proposal also emphasized the need to consider the integration of education, economic development, infrastructure, and livability as they affect these issues.

The AIA accepted the proposal and, after a preliminary visit by a small group in February, the SDAT members arrived in Central on April 16. For three days, the team members, working closely with local officials, community leaders, technical experts, and citizens, studied the community and its concerns. During those three days, the team came to understand the issues and used its expertise to frame a wide range of recommendations, which were presented to the community in a public meeting on April 18, 2007.



This report is a more detailed version of the findings and recommendations that were presented to the community on April 18, 2007. After a brief overview of the SDAT program and process, and a short discussion of Central and the issues it is facing, the report covers

- Natural resources and land use
- Transportation
- Planning, land use, and livability
- Schools and education
- Community sustainability and livability

A closing section offers some thoughts on how the community can best move forward to address the range of issues and recommendations covered in the report.



## **What Is the SDAT Program?**

The SDAT program is an interdisciplinary community assistance program that focuses on principles of sustainability. Launched in 2005, the program represents an exciting new chapter in the AIA's history of supporting communities with volunteer design expertise.

The SDAT program is modeled on the AIA's Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) program. While the R/UDAT program provides communities with specific design solutions, the SDAT program provides broad assessments to help frame future policies or design solutions in the context of sustainability and helps communities plan the first steps of implementation. The SDAT program is based on an understanding of design as a process that

- Is integrative, holistic, and visual
- Is central to achieving a sustainable relationship among humans, the natural environment, and the place
- Gives three-dimensional form to a culture and a place
- Achieves balance among culture, environment, and economic systems

The SDAT program is grounded in the AIA design assistance team values, which call for a multidisciplinary approach, objectivity of the participating team members, and broad public participation.

## **Why Is the SDAT Program Valuable?**

Many communities are immobilized by conflicting agendas, politics, personalities, or even an overabundance of opportunities. Many communities have not yet taken stock of their current practices and policies within a sustainability framework, while others have identified issues of concern but desire assistance in developing a plan of action to increase sustainability. The SDAT process ensures that alternative solutions are given a fair hearing and that options are weighed impartially. The SDAT process

- Informs the community of opportunities and encourages them to take action to protect local and regional resources
- Helps the community understand the structure of the place at various scales and contexts—from regional resources to the neighborhood scale

- Explores and articulates the larger contexts and interactions of ecological, sociological, economic, and physical systems
- Visualizes potential futures
- Recognizes and describes the qualities of a place by preserving the best elements of the past, addressing the needs of the present, and planning for the needs of future generations
- Identifies and describes choices and consequences
- Connects plans and actions
- Advances the principles of quality sustainable communities
- Helps the community define the roles of various stakeholders
- Develops a roadmap for the implementation of more sustainable policies and practices

The key to SDAT success is diversity and participation; the process involves multiple disciplines and multiple stakeholders. The SDAT process includes not only the expert team but also government agencies and officials, private businesses, schools and students, community members, and other parties as appropriate.

### **Who Are the Key Participants in the SDAT Process?**

SDATs bring a team of respected professionals, selected on the basis of their experience with the specific issues facing the community, to work with community decision makers to help them develop a vision and framework for a sustainable future. Team members volunteer their time to be a member of the SDAT. To ensure their objectivity, they agree to refrain from taking paid work for three years from the date of completion of the SDAT project. A distinct team is assembled for each project based on the project's unique features. The team consists of a leader, five to seven members, and a staff person from the AIA Center for Communities by Design.



The professional stature of the SDAT members, their independence, and the pro bono nature of their work generate community respect and enthusiasm for the SDAT process, which in turn encourages participation by community stakeholders. The passion and creativity that are unleashed by a top-notch multidisciplinary team of professionals working collaboratively can produce extraordinary results.

### *Local Steering Committee*

The steering committee is the SDAT project's key organizing group. It is responsible for assembling local and regional information, organizing the preliminary meeting and SDAT visit, and generating local media coverage during the entire project. After the SDAT visits, the steering committee typically evolves into a group that is dedicated to implementing the SDAT recommendations.



### *Local Technical Committee*

The local technical committee is the SDAT project's technical support group, including local design professionals, environmental professionals, economists, and others whose skills and experience parallel those of the SDAT members and who bring with them detailed knowledge of local conditions, issues, and information resources. Their presence magnifies the effectiveness of the team.

### *Citizens*

In the end, the citizens of the community are the critical players, both for their insights and observations during the team visit and their support for the new directions that emerge from the SDAT process.

On behalf of the Central SDAT and the AIA, it is hoped this report will be a useful guide to the Central community as it charts its future for the coming years and generations.

# CENTRAL TODAY

## History

Central is in the northeast portion of East Baton Rouge Parish, in the region known as Central. The city boundaries, as defined by the Amite and Comite rivers on the east and west respectively and a zone defined by Greenwell Springs Port Hudson Road to the north, encompass approximately 62 square miles of a flood-prone plain.

When European settlers arrived in the 1800s they encountered a region of pine woods inhabited by the Amite and Choctaw Indians. The early economy consisted of cotton, sweet potatoes, and pine mills. In 1853 the Greenwell Springs Resort was built to take advantage of the renowned mineral springs. This became a popular destination for many people escaping yellow fever epidemics in cities. The 10 springs' healing and therapeutic properties were reputed to cure almost any ailment. The resort also became an entertainment source for the community and provided employment for many area residents.

During the Civil War the Greenwell Springs Resort served as a refuge from war-torn Baton Rouge, as well as a military headquarters and an infirmary. Later postwar reconstruction saw the progressive dismantling of the resort as local residents recovered the wood to rebuild their destroyed homes. By 1910 a grand new hotel and a bottling company were built, only to close their doors the following year. The 1920s saw these buildings converted into a tuberculosis hospital, and today the site houses a state psychiatric facility.

When Standard Oil was built in 1909, this began a shift from a predominantly agricultural to a more industrial economy as the Central region became a suburb of Baton Rouge; traces of this legacy can be seen today.

During the 1800s Central's children were educated in the many one-room schoolhouses scattered throughout the area. By 1895 the residents joined together to build a centralized school, calling it "Central School." This same desire for quality education for the area's children would again, a century later, be the driving force to incorporate as a city. In 2005 Governor Blanco approved Central's incorporation, and in 2006 the Central Community School District was created.

## **Demographics: Country Living in the City**

This primarily rural suburb of East Baton Rouge had a population of approximately 27,000 residents at the time of incorporation. Growth in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita has bumped the population up to 30,000; this trend is expected to continue. The excellent high school and middle school and the 28 community churches are the center of Central's social and civic life. Residents take great pride in their "Mayberry" kind of town. This upper-middle class community has an annual median income of \$51,000.

The East Baton Rouge Area Chamber of Commerce anticipates a steady growth in jobs, population, and the overall economy. Industry is expected to expand in traditional manufacturing sectors. And new businesses such as high-end hotels, film production studios, and retail centers have begun to spring up in the region, partly in response to the recent population increase. Although Central's population is dependent on Baton Rouge's job base, with many people commuting to jobs, the city has a small sector of locally owned small businesses.

## **Trends**

Louisiana population shifts after Katrina and Rita have increased Central's rate of sprawl development. As populations continue to move away from the flood-prone coastal regions, the city will continue to see growth. In addition to its location in a zone safe from hurricane disaster, the city offers a high quality of life and excellent schools, making it an attractive area for families. The availability of land and ease of development for subdivisions also adds to the appeal. Its central location and proximity to state highways further add to the appeal of what was once a Baton Rouge suburb.

## *Why They Needed Help*

With its new designation as a city, Central now has the opportunity to shape its future and take control of its destiny. Its proximity to Baton Rouge, readily developable land, and an excellent school system make the city vulnerable to endless, soulless sprawl. The current real estate market has begun to price younger families out of Central, which will reduce chances of social sustainability. This rapid growth also precludes a healthier organic growth rate, critical to any new city.

Although Central is better situated than Louisiana's coastal communities, 75 percent of its area is still in a floodplain and prone to backwater flooding, and as much as 30 percent of the city has been inundated during significant storms, such as the flood of 1983.

Central's location, straddling major vehicular access corridors, also creates a transportation bottleneck through the city, affecting morning and evening rush hours without providing any economic benefits. The current congestion is only expected to get worse as the region grows.

# NATURAL RESOURCES AND LAND USE

## **Strengths**

Central is rich in many scenic and natural resources, including green forests, open fields, abundant wildlife, flowing rivers, unique cultural sites, and many recreational opportunities. These abundant natural resources account for the community's rural character—one of the things most cherished by Central's residents. Conserving this rural character is of vital importance to everyone who lives in Central.

## **Weaknesses**

For natural resources, Central's greatest weaknesses include the absence of a comprehensive floodplain management plan and an integrated smart growth plan to protect the community's natural resources while promoting sustainable development that preserves Central's rural character and meets the community's needs.

## **Opportunities and Actions**

A comprehensive flood mitigation plan that includes policies and ordinances to guide development in hazard-prone areas will substantially reduce the risk and potential of future communitywide flood losses. Similarly development of an integrated smart growth plan will protect Central's rural character while promoting sustainable development that meets the community's needs. Establishing greenways along the Amite and Comite rivers will help to protect these environmentally important river systems, preserve important cultural sites, and provide networks for people and wildlife.

## **Threats**

Without strong land-use planning, economic losses and hardships caused by flooding will increase greatly as development expands in flood-prone areas, and the community's rural character will be lost with continuing development of traditional, single-family residential housing on large lots.



Major access roads were closed due to flooding, hindering access by emergency vehicles, and eight subdivisions were isolated by floodwaters. Newspapers reported that numerous houses in the Winchester subdivision were flooded within two or three feet of their rooftops. One subdivision resident said he had built his house two feet above the 1977 flood level and still got at least two feet of water in his house. Another resident of the subdivision said his house was built in 1979 above the 100-year floodplain, but still was flooded. Flooding also occurred in the nearby Cimarron subdivision, and some residents in the back part of the subdivision who had been flooded before later gave up their homes as part of a buy-out program, recognizing that the danger of future flooding was too great to remain.

Development of a floodplain mitigation plan for Central will not only contribute to maintaining the community's rural character but also reduce future economic losses and hardships caused by flooding. Further, to participate in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), Central must develop, adopt, and enforce a floodplain management ordinance that regulates development in the community's floodplain. The NFIP's two fundamental objectives are to ensure that new buildings will be free from flood damage and prevent new developments from increasing flood damages. The NFIP's basic purpose is not to prohibit floodplain development but to guide development in floodplain areas so as to greatly lessen the economic loss and social disruption caused by impending flood events.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) provides funding to assist states and communities in implementing measures to reduce or eliminate long-term risk of flood damage to buildings, manufactured homes, and other structures insurable under the NFIP. The FMA was created as part of the National Flood Insurance Reform Act of 1994 (42 U.S.C. 4101) with the goal of reducing or eliminating claims under the NFIP. The FMA is a predisaster grant program.

Planning is FMA's foundation. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) encourages communities to identify ways to reduce their risk of flood damage by preparing a flood mitigation plan. Communities that have flood mitigation plans can request approval of their plans from their FMA state point of contact and FEMA. Communities with approved plans are eligible to apply for FMA project grants. Plans must assess flood risk and identify actions to mitigate identified risks. Two types of grants are available to communities: planning grants and project grants.

Although a community must maintain a set of floodway, general, and specific standards to participate and maintain eligibility for the NFIP, Central should consider adopting higher floodplain regulatory standards to better meet its floodplain-management and open-space goals. A comprehensive land-use plan should specify where development should and should not occur in the community. This will enable Central to guide land use away from flood-prone areas, perhaps using these areas for greenways, parks, golf courses, backyards, or natural areas. A set of local measures such as zoning and subdivision ordinances, however, will need to be developed to guide and regulate land use in Central, including

- Zoning ordinances. In a zoning ordinance, floodplains can be designated as zoning districts in which development is completely prohibited or allowed only if the development is constructed to minimize flood damage (per the requirements of the NFIP and local floodplain management ordinances). Some types of flood districts are dedicated for recreation, public use, conservation, or cluster developments that keep houses out of floodplains. Often the flood zone designation takes the form of an overlay or combining zone.
- Subdivision ordinances. These regulations determine how land will be broken down into individual lots. They also state how homes should be sited in relation to the floodplain (preferably outside) and set construction and location standards for the infrastructure that will service the subdivision.

#### **WHAT ARE CENTRAL'S RESPONSIBILITIES UNDER THE NFIP?**

- Require development permits for all proposed construction and other developments in the community's designated 100-year floodplain
- Review permits to verify that sites are reasonably safe from flooding
- Review subdivision proposals to determine whether projects are safe from flooding and provide adequate drainage
- Require residential structures to have their lowest floors (including basement) elevated at least to or above the base flood elevation (BFE)
- Require nonresidential structures to have their first floors elevated or floodproofed to one foot above the BFE
- Require manufactured homes to be elevated and anchored
- Require water supply systems designed to eliminate flood water infiltration
- Require new and replacement sanitary sewage systems designed to minimize or eliminate flood water infiltration
- Assure that the flood-carrying capacity of altered or relocated watercourses is maintained
- Maintain records of all development permits
- Verify and document the first-floor elevations of new or substantially improved structures

- Building codes. Flood protection standards should be incorporated into the local building code. At a minimum they should ensure that the structure's lowest floor is built above the BFE and that the foundation will withstand flood forces.
- Floodplain management ordinances. These floodplain ordinances go beyond the minimum standards required by the NFIP (e.g., more restrictive floodways, freeboard above the BFE, riparian setbacks).
- Stormwater management regulations. These require developers to build on-site detention basins to handle the increased runoff caused by new developments with large impervious areas (e.g., subdivisions, shopping malls). Stormwater is not allowed to leave the property at a rate higher than its predeveloped condition. In addition stormwater regulations can address the problem of sedimentation, which can fill in channels and lakes, reducing their ability to carry or store floodwaters. One way to keep sediment from entering nearby streams and rivers is to require sediment traps at new construction sites.
- Postdisaster recovery ordinances. This ordinance establishes a recovery organization that authorizes a variety of pre- and postevent planning and regulatory powers and procedures related to disaster recovery and reconstruction.
- Wetlands protection. Wetlands can store large amounts of floodwaters, slow and reduce downstream flows, and protect shorelines from erosion. Efforts to preserve wetlands, especially smaller ones not covered by a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 404 (wetlands) permit, can aid a community's efforts to decrease flood damages.

Given Central's high vulnerability to natural disasters, the community should also develop an approved hazard mitigation plan as required by the national postdisaster Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). This is required if a community is to receive HMGP funds after a disaster has occurred. The program covers losses caused by flooding and other causes.

### *Sustainable Development Strategies*

As a result of Central's great schools, green forests, open fields, and flowing rivers, its population is expected to increase substantially in coming years. Unplanned growth could damage Central's abundant natural resources and rural character, features that residents cherish most about their community. Developing a comprehensive land-use plan that incorporates smart-growth techniques would provide the opportunity to protect the community's natural resources while promoting sustainable development that preserves Central's rural character and meets the community's needs.

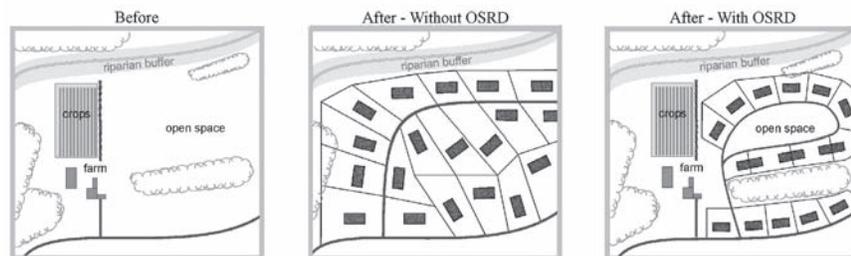
Smart growth is not “no growth”; rather it is a principle of land development that emphasizes mixing land uses, increases the availability of a range of housing types in neighborhoods, takes advantage of compact design, and fosters distinctive and attractive communities. It preserves open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas; strengthens existing communities; provides a variety of transportation choices; makes development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective; and encourages community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

A critical component of smart growth is to identify areas that are appropriate for development and those that should be protected and preserved. Good candidates for development include downtowns, village centers, areas adjacent to these centers, brownfields, and sites with access to transportation and other infrastructure.

The first step is to conduct a communitywide comprehensive planning process to identify locations within Central that are appropriate for development and areas that should remain open space. Following the identification of these areas, the community must ensure that zoning and other incentives will result in development consistent with these plans. Where and how Central chooses to implement smart growth should be explicitly reflected in the zoning and subdivision regulations that dictate future growth.

Many tools can be used to implement a smart-growth plan, including

- Traditional neighborhood design (TND). TND, also known as “new urbanism,” “neo-traditional,” or village-style development, includes a variety of housing types, a mix of land uses, an active center, a walkable design, and often a transit option within a compact neighborhood scale area, either as infill in an existing developed area or as a district-scale project.
- Open space residential design (OSRD). OSRD is an approach to residential development that promotes open-space preservation based on environmental and social priorities. It features partnership in development design between municipal officials and developers that provides innovative flexible incentives for highest marketability, mixed housing types and land uses, and minimal disturbance to the natural terrain. This tool is especially relevant to Central where much of its residential development



has been single-family homes on large-sized lots. The environmental and social benefits derived from OSRD make it attractive to community residents, while economic incentives such as the addition of valuable amenities to enhance marketing and sales and the streamlining of the plan review process ultimately benefit developers.

- Low-impact development (LID). LID is a more sustainable land development pattern that results from a site planning process that first identifies critical natural resources, then determines appropriate building envelopes. LID also incorporates a range of best management practices that preserve the land's natural hydrology.
- Inclusionary zoning. Inclusionary zoning requires a portion of the housing units in certain real estate developments to be reserved as affordable to low- and moderate-income households. It is an effective tool that can be used by municipalities to ensure that adequate affordable units are included in the normal course of real estate development.

Ten principles express the characteristics of smart-growth development that protects a community's natural resources, promotes social and economic health, and meets the needs of community residents:

1. Redevelop first. Revitalizing existing neighborhoods doesn't require expensive new infrastructure or consume forest and fields, and finds new uses for historic buildings and underutilized brownfield sites.
2. Concentrate development. Compact development conserves land and fosters vibrant and walkable districts. More compact development saves the public sector millions of dollars by reducing the costs of public services.
3. Be fair. The benefits and burdens of development should be equitably shared by all. Transparent and predictable permitting will result in cost-effective and fair outcomes.
4. Restore and enhance the environment. The conservation, protection, and restoration of water, land, and cultural resources provides a high quality of life and ecological health.
5. Conserve natural resources. Renewable energy and efficient use of building materials and water contribute to a healthier environment, limit waste, and are cost-effective.
6. Expand housing opportunities. Expanding the number, affordability, and diversity of housing units will ensure that people of all abilities, income levels, and ages have appropriate housing options.
7. Provide transportation choice. Opportunities for public transit, walking, and biking should be expanded.

8. Increase job opportunities. Connecting people with jobs in their communities and close to homes and transportation infrastructure will expand the local economy.
9. Foster sustainable businesses. Great potential exists for new, innovative industries and for resource-based industries to contribute to the state's social, economic, and environmental health.
10. Plan regionally. Economic development, water, transportation, and housing are regional in nature; they don't stop at the town boundary. Regional planning recognizes this and results in intermunicipal coordination and better outcomes.

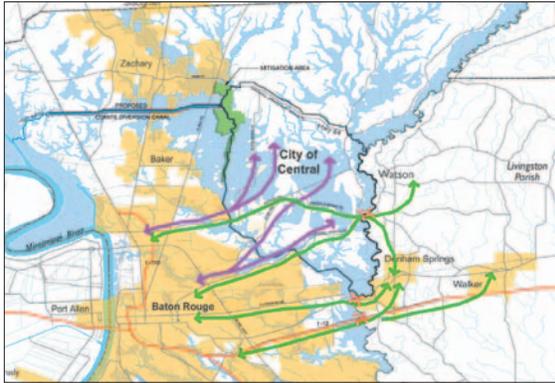
#### *Protection of Valued Scenic Resources and Cultural Sites*

The Amite and Comite rivers, with their extensive floodplains, riparian forests, and scenic roadways provide an important opportunity to establish greenways along these two rivers. Greenways are corridors of protected public land established along rivers, stream valleys, ridges, abandoned railroads, scenic roads, and other linear features. Greenways often link recreational, cultural, and ecological features while improving network pathways for people and wildlife. Greenways also function as buffers to protect forests, wetlands, grasslands, and rivers and provide a multitude of benefits for people, wildlife, and the economy. Establishing greenways along the Amite and Comite rivers would link people with the outdoors, provide recreational opportunities for people and natural corridors for wildlife, and protect these environmentally important river systems and lands. Incorporating the Greenwell Springs Historic site into the greenway would also help protect this important cultural site and provide a unique tourism destination.

There are many different sources of funds for the acquisition, development, and management of greenway facilities. To maximize the amount of financial support for any greenway project, local public-sector funds should be combined with funds from state, federal, and private-sector sources. The Transportation Efficiency Act of the 21st Century, and its predecessor, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, is the single largest source of federal funding for greenway and other bicycle and pedestrian projects in the United States. It is administered through the U.S. Department of Transportation and provides up to 80 percent of the cost of developing and constructing facilities such as greenways, rail trails, sidewalks, and bike lanes. Opportunities also exist to designate the Amite and Comite rivers as wild and scenic rivers under the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

# TRANSPORTATION

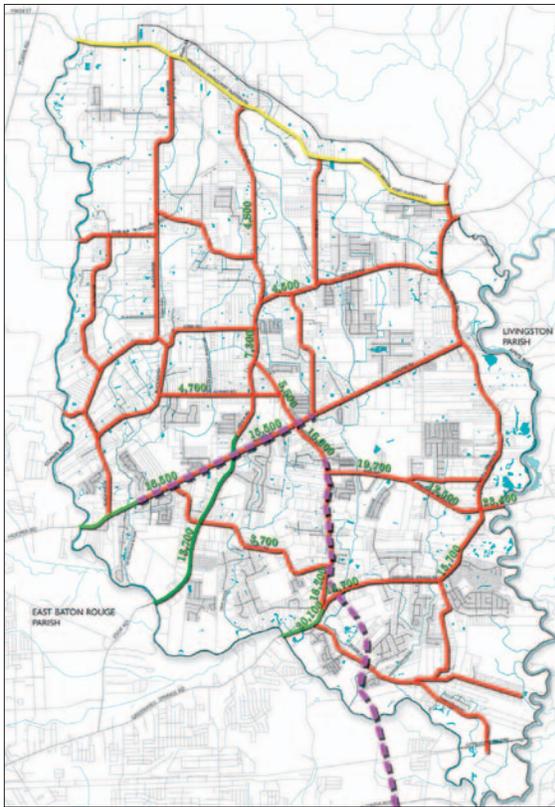
Central’s road network is characterized as a radial or hub-and-spoke network that extends out from Baton Rouge, the area’s regional center. Accordingly Central’s road network carries traffic generated by Central and other cities, such as Livingston Parish.



As much as 30–40 percent of the traffic traveling on Central’s road system is externally generated and does not have a primary origin or destination in the city. As a consequence, much of the congestion experienced during morning and afternoon peak commute periods is associated with traffic unrelated to activities in Central.

Three primary issues should be addressed to effectively support the city’s objectives for quality residential neighborhoods and economic growth through business development:

- Develop a set of near- and long-term transportation improvements
- Tailor road design standards to match land-use types
- Develop an implementation plan



Like any suburban area, traffic volume is a by-product of land development. Central’s traffic volumes will continue to grow due to several factors: population relocated by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as the city has been recognized as a safe haven from similar future natural disasters; an attractive rural setting; and an emphasis on improved schools. To address traffic volume growth, capacity must be added to the road network. Because resources are limited, it will be necessary to focus on a series of low-cost near-term improvements while planning for funding and construction to meet longer-term needs.

## Transportation Improvements

### Near-Term Improvements

The community indicated a preference for reducing stops and keeping traffic flowing smoothly, as opposed to improving overall speed (reducing delay). Near-term improvements should focus on continuing to build on the improvements and technology initiated by the parish by making spot improvements to decrease stops and keep traffic moving at controlled intersections. This can be accomplished by selectively adding auxiliary lanes (dual left-turn lanes and exclusive right-turn lanes), refining traffic signal timings, and enhancing street marking. A good example of these kinds of improvements was near the Wal-Mart, where intersection widening and auxiliary lanes improved traffic throughflow and enhanced the site's accessibility to adjacent land uses.

Another approach that might be suited to Central is building roundabouts, which when properly designed can dramatically reduce vehicle stops, delay, and queues. Roundabouts typically merge conflicting traffic flows at conflict points. This is in contrast to traffic signals that require one or more conflicting traffic movements to stop while other movements move safely.

Initial assessments of candidate locations where roundabouts may be an appropriate solution are shown in Figure 3. Careful analysis must be performed to ensure that this solution is applied properly and such a design does not result in impacts greater than the problems the city is attempting to resolve. Roundabouts also can serve as a signature design element that can be constructed as entryways and focal points to distinguish Central from adjacent communities.

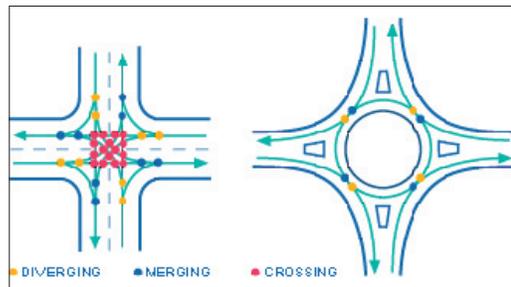
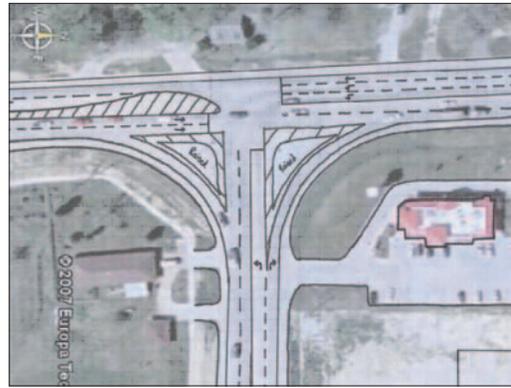
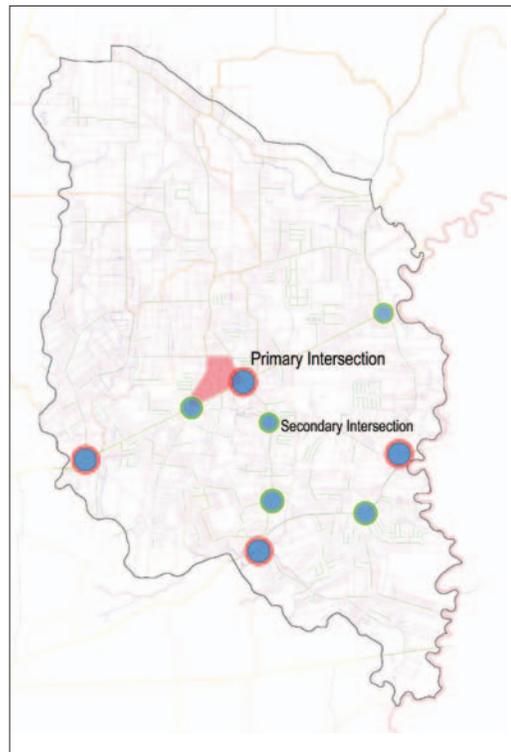
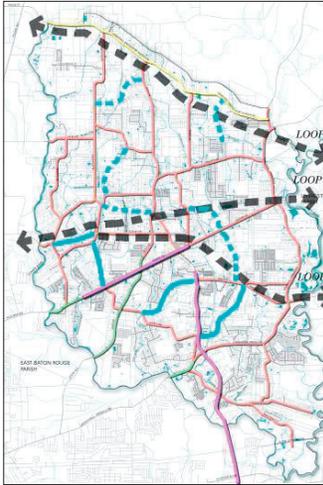


Figure 3. Possible Roundabout Locations





### Long-Term Improvements

To effectively address longer-term needs and carefully focus on priorities, it will be necessary to conduct a comprehensive transportation study. This study should identify intermediate and long-term travel demands, identify alternative corridor and road segment capacity/corridor improvements, evaluate and select a set of preferred solutions, and develop a program for funding these improvements. It is critical to adopt such a plan so that impending land development does not foreclose road network right-of-way opportunities or artificially increase their cost. While it is premature for the SDAT to make specific recommendations regarding new corridor improvements, it is recommended that no new bridge improvements beyond those already programmed be pursued because this will only permit traffic volumes to increase, adding congestion to the already impacted road network.

### Road Classification System

A road classification system should be developed as part of the comprehensive transportation planning study. This road hierarchy should match state and federal definitions to enhance funding opportunities from outside public sources and should balance the need for accessibility on local streets and through-volume capacity on arterials and major thoroughways. To this end, road cross-sections should be developed to blend and serve



adjacent land uses with smaller, lower-speed roads with a high level of accessibility in residential areas and larger streets with more limited accessibility in commercial, institutional, and industrial settings.



Road design standards should also reflect Central's rural character with appropriate landscaping, consolidation of driveways in commercial areas, and sidewalks to establish opportunities for pedestrian and bicycle circulation. On existing major through-streets outside commercial areas, efforts should be developed to create shoulders that can provide refuge for disabled vehicles and opportunities for nonmotorized travel.

These design standards should be coupled with development guidelines that will serve as incentives for private development to construct or substantially contribute to road improvements affected by their development.

Providing density incentives, reducing building setbacks, and providing standards that are complementary to quality development with appropriate landscaping on one-way roads can be constructed at limited cost to the city.

Road system continuity, particularly in residential areas, is another issue that should be addressed as part of citywide transportation planning. Policies to encourage road system continuity must be carefully developed to verify that the adjacent neighborhood streets have adequate capacity to provide safe traffic movement while minimizing impacts on wetlands and other natural amenities. Even in areas where a general purpose traffic connection may be inappropriate, emergency vehicle access should be provided. It is recommended that the fire department use its standards in defining the need for multiple connections to the major roadway network to ensure the safe response of fire, police, and emergency medical services as the city grows.

Nonmotorized transportation improvements also should be considered as part of the citywide transportation plan, with a separate plan element. Initially trails can be developed as part of greenways, tourist and recreational features, and park expansion and development. As roads are reconstructed, appropriate provisions for primary bike routes, pedestrian, and equestrian trails should be considered.

### **Implementation Plan**

Currently the need and desire for major transportation improvements substantially exceeds Central's resources. Accordingly the most important element of the transportation planning process is development of a capital facilities element to fund the construction of these increasingly expensive facilities. Improvements can be carefully prioritized, with the knowledge of costs and a realistic assessment of resources. Resources can be substantially enhanced by partnering with private development, adjacent parishes, the state, and federal agencies. The transportation plan must identify special programs where local funds can be leveraged to construct transportation improvements that are compatible with broader community goals.

Although traffic may not be the most important aspect of the city's future, it is one of the most tangible aspects of day-to-day life and will therefore require the attention of city leadership. With proper planning, the transportation system can be the glue that holds

various key aspects of a healthy community together. The keys to Central achieving these objectives are

- Development of a comprehensive transportation plan
- Creation of design standards and incentives that support quality land use and economic development compatible with Central's rural character
- Careful prioritization of transportation improvements with a supporting financial plan that includes incentives and partnerships with others who benefit

# PLANNING, LAND USE, AND LIVABILITY

## **Strengths**

Central's strengths, as identified by the community during the AIA SDAT public meetings, include the people, the schools, and the natural environment. Specific strengths mentioned include the schools, shared heritage and values, open space, neighborhoods, country atmosphere, trees and tree cover, diverse natural habitats, rivers, natural areas, lots of water, ability to influence future growth, and caring people. Interestingly, we heard very little emphasis on the built environment.

## **Weaknesses**

Community members identified Central's weaknesses as traffic and the lack of a town center and supporting services. Specific issues mentioned include traffic congestion; dilapidated buildings; lack of housing, shopping, entertainment, health care, and jobs; no main street or downtown; no mass transit; the need to drive to go anywhere; and the lack of connectedness.

## **Opportunities and Actions**

Community members identified several opportunities to improve the built environment. These include developing curbs, gutters, sidewalks, and sewers with streets; retaining and preserving green space; preserving woodland as new housing is developed; managing growth to achieve a balance between growth and conservation; developing even better schools; and attracting retirement communities.

## **Threats**

Community members support additional growth but all expressed concern about risks from new development. These concerns include uncontrolled growth that could result from improved schools and a more attractive community, increased traffic from wider roads, uncontrolled growth, increased taxes and resulting oversized government, and an increase in crime.

During the AIA SDAT public meetings, community members identified long-term and short-term actions to help improve Central. We heard a focus on schools, downtown, and building a sense of place:

- Get a Central ZIP code that matches city boundaries (short-term action)
- Enhance city gateways with signage and visual improvements (short-term action)
- Clean up junk cars, junk signs, and weeds along city roads (short-term action)
- Develop a town center/downtown that will serve now and in the future
- Increase parks and recreation spaces, especially fields and river recreation
- Become the number one school district in the state
- Ensure traffic is manageable
- Ensure the community has a range of housing types and costs (single-family homes, senior housing, high-end market, starter homes, quality apartments, condominiums, assisted living residences)
- Improve health care facilities within the city
- Develop a conference center to tie in with the park

### **Downtown Sense of Place and Vision**

Central is a rural, people-focused community. Values, schools, and a sense of place are the building blocks that tie the community together. Central residents embrace growth that builds community character and maintains the existing rural character and natural resources. They want a strong vibrant downtown that builds a sense of place, accommodates community growth, provides services to residents, reduces car trips outside the city, reduces sprawl, provides a range of housing, and creates local jobs and economic development.

Central's current commercial development pattern exemplifies the complaint made about many communities—"there is no *there* there." Residents have an opportunity to guide future development and create a sense of place because commercial development is limited and existing buildings are of an ephemeral nature.

Central does not need a downtown that is simply a modified strip center. It needs a mixed-use destination that will house residents, reduce sprawl, provide jobs, reduce the need for residents to drive outside the community, and provide services and a sense of place. Central needs to take steps to halt sprawl and preserve its rural areas, resulting in a true downtown where residents work, shop, live, and gather. Central needs to build a downtown with a “there there.”

### *Downtown Central Design Principles*

The following guiding principles can help create a strong, vibrant, and sustainable downtown Central:

- Downtown must include a strong retail component. Fifty years ago, most retail sales took place in downtowns. Today with regional malls, power centers, and strip commercial commanding most retail dollars, downtowns rely more heavily on entertainment, culture, and civic life. Retail remains an important component of successful downtowns, part of the critical mix it takes to make a downtown thrive.
- Downtown must include all aspects of hospitality and entertainment, including food and drink, hotels, and service. These services are the lifeblood of healthy downtowns. They draw customers who spend money in multiple establishments.
- To attract retail, a portion of downtown must be adjacent to high-volume roads (ideally more than 15,000 cars a day).
- Downtown cannot become so dominated by the focus on high-traffic streets that pedestrians do not enjoy their visits. These types of areas exclude pedestrians and have no character. No downtown can survive as a downtown if they do not provide a pleasant pedestrian experience.
- Locate City Hall downtown and make downtown the center of government and civic life. Other civic improvements (e.g., a new post office, veterans’ monuments, small urban park, arts complex, senior or youth centers) also should be located downtown.
- Increase downtown activities that add vitality to adjacent businesses and downtown. Example activities include Cooking for Central, farmers markets, sidewalk sales, and festivals.
- To the extent practical, office use should be directed to downtown. No nondowntown areas of Central should be zoned to allow office use outside of downtown or extremely limited mixed-use areas, to concentrate the demand downtown.

- Senior housing, assisted living residences, and nursing homes should be strongly encouraged above the first floor in the downtown business district and on any floor in the adjacent residential areas. Seniors drive less than other adult populations and own fewer cars and they can provide foot traffic for area businesses. Providing senior housing downtown can help seniors to stay in their homes longer, avoiding the stress and cost that occurs when seniors can no longer maintain themselves in their suburban car-oriented homes.
- To keep downtown vibrant, a substantial amount of housing should be in and adjacent to downtown. For a city the size of Central, a minimum of 12,000 people should be living in or within 0.5 miles (preferably within 0.25 miles) of downtown. Ideally, there should be 20,000 people living within 0.5 miles of downtown. Housing is the single most important ingredient in keeping many downtowns lively, especially in the evenings and weekends. Housing, and the resulting pedestrian activity, also are essential to maintaining a safe feel to downtown at night. Housing should be allowed and encouraged in every building downtown, above the first floor. Downtown housing is the most effective way to transfer travel modes from automobile to foot, thereby reducing overall vehicle trip generation, traffic congestion, and commercial parking demands.
- Link downtown to schools. Both attract visitors and together they create a healthy synergy.
- Design is critical in the downtown. People visit downtown because they want to and because there is a “there there,” not because downtowns are the most convenient areas to show. Design is part of what makes downtowns attractive for these visitors. Central has the opportunity to build on the historic southern commercial and mixed-use vernacular that makes historic southern cities so desirable. Design standards with teeth related to building detailing, windows, doors, articulations, and street trees, is critical. The city should provide clear standards so that developers don’t have to worry about review boards having excessive discretion. In the commercial core, residential use should not be allowed on buildings’ first floor to avoid any break in the commercial core. Buildings should be built up to the sidewalks and frame the streets, should be attractive and well designed, and should be a minimum of two to three stories in height. Lastly, property owners should be allowed and encouraged to build porches over the sidewalks.
- Maximize on-street parking, ideally using back-in angle parking, in the downtown. On-street parking spaces are the most valuable spaces to businesses and their customers.



In larger cities, each on-street parking space brings in \$100,000 in business. The value to Central will be substantially less but the annual value to businesses may still be as valuable as the car that parks in the space.

- Prevent excessive parking lots, especially parking lots on city streets. A strip commercial business only needs to attract a customer for its business, for which a big parking lot in front is ideal. A downtown, however, needs to create a sense of place where visitors arrive and then walk, for which on-street parking and additional lots behind buildings is critical.



- Short blocks are critical to keep downtown walkable. On at least one dimension, blocks should be no wider than 250 or 300 feet. On the other dimension, they should be no wider than 500 feet, although traffic safety concerns at intersections with major streets may occasionally dictate larger blocks. Regardless of the size of the blocks, midblock alleys, walkways through buildings, and walkways between buildings are all critical to keep blocks walkable and provide easy connection to parking behind buildings.
- Local and unique businesses are a critical part of the downtown tenant mix. National chains and franchises may well be a part of the downtown tenant mix but special attention should be given to local businesses. These tenants add a unique character to downtown and are more likely to survive up-and-down business cycles.

- Management of downtown must support the needs of downtown businesses and residents. Downtown advocates, shared marketing efforts, coordination on late business hours, a voice in local government, and the like are all critical to the success of any downtown. Programs like the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Program help create models for successful downtowns.
- In addition to design standards, downtown requires a totally different zoning approach than other areas of town. Downtown zoning is similar in many respects to traditional neighborhood development (TND) zoning but much stronger. Downtown is the heart of the city and interacts with the city and the surrounding neighborhoods more than a TND. There is no need for frontage, minimum lot size, or minimum frontage downtown. Instead, use maximum setbacks (10’) and minimum heights (25–30’), also known as build-to lines. Parking is the lifeblood of rural cities but too much parking is their death. Encourage or require shared parking and consider not requiring any parking requirements for downtown uses, or at least have dramatically less stringent requirements. Market conditions will dictate that some housing be provided, and on-street parking will house much of the need. Encourage narrow buildings with parking behind the buildings and anchor buildings that might absorb an entire parking lot. Off-street parking is a critical resource; it just shouldn’t dominate. Consider adopting minimum density provisions. For downtown to succeed, a large population is required. If housing is developed at densities of less than eight dwelling units per acre (20–30 is ideal), it will be very hard to achieve the necessary population.
- Consider what financial tools are needed to make downtown succeed. Infrastructure necessary to support the downtown may be funded in part with some combination of special assessments on the property owners who benefit from the project, tax increment financing (TIF), and investment of a portion of expected sales tax receipts. Any new downtown development will create a positive net flow of money to the city. Even if the city needs to forgo a portion of the taxes to make the project work, it will still bring in more money than if the downtown redevelopment was never to occur.
- Install a landmark now to help identify what will become downtown. Currently visitors to the city don’t know when they have arrived at the city’s center—there is no gateway to downtown or landmark to make a visitor think, “I’m somewhere special or different now.” Eventually, downtown will be a beautiful and vibrant area with signature architecture. Until then, artwork or some other point symbol that grabs people’s attention should be installed.

## Analysis of Future Downtown Central

Downtown needs be in an area that is easily accessible to most residents, has the basic infrastructure available to serve downtown, and has enough traffic to allow retail and hospitality to thrive but not be dominated by traffic. We examined several areas that addressed these requirements, including

- Bypass strip center focus—intersection of Sullivan and Wax roads. This area has the traffic volume needed for a downtown cluster. One charrette participant suggested that a new road from this point to Lovett Road could become a main street, with the blank slate that could be useful for a downtown.
- Strip center focus—intersection of Hooper and Joor roads. This area has the traffic volumes but off-road developable land is limited and the site is more likely to become a strip commercial area that would not attract residential tenants.

Based on our analysis, we do not recommend either of the above sites for several reasons:

- The sites, especially Sullivan and Wax, have significant environmental issues that limit development, especially model sustainable development, including slopes, wetlands, a stream, and flooding
- The sites do not have existing attractions that would bring in visitors and help make this area a success
- The traffic at both sites, especially Sullivan and Wax, is less local and less focused on the services that a small downtown should offer
- It is unknown if a future road is to be developed extending Wax to the west of Sullivan, making it unlikely that this site is viable for the foreseeable future
- Both sites, if developed, are more likely to become a thin-strip commercial area than a true downtown
- Both sites lack appropriate real estate for a downtown and 12,000 to 20,000 people within a short walk of the downtown

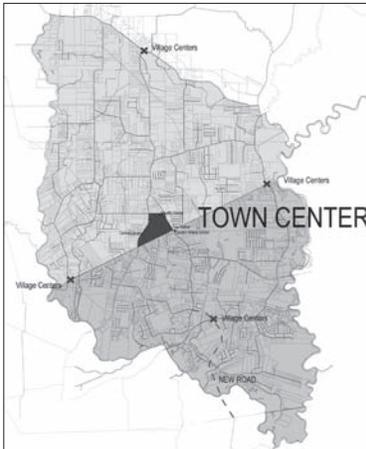


### *Civic Focus: Intersection of Hooper and Sullivan Roads*

This area is the preferred location, with the potential downtown extending to the north and west of the intersection. There is land here for a downtown to serve Central, even with significant population increases; the road network is ideal; the traffic levels are good; and the connection to existing and potential civic presence ideal. Environmental site constraints are much more limited at this site than the other candidates and are eminently manageable.



To encourage downtown development, Central needs to be extremely judicious in approving commercial development elsewhere in the city. Downtown will not, nor should it, provide all services to all areas of the community. The community should consider creating small (e.g., two-acre) village centers in strategic locations at key intersections to provide areas serving basic services. These village centers should be true village centers, not commercial strips, with attractive design to fit into primarily residential neighborhoods. We propose creating four village centers:



- Intersection of Joor Road and Greenwell Springs/Port Hudson Road
- Intersection of Greenwell Springs Road and either Hooper Road or Magnolia Bridge Road
- Intersection of Greenwell Springs Road and the new Central access highway
- Hooper Road on the east side of the intersection with Blackwater Road

To avoid sprawl and concentrate development, zoning should not allow retail or commercial development outside of the areas already zoned and developed for such uses (outside of downtown and the four village centers).

### *Downtown Central Triangle*

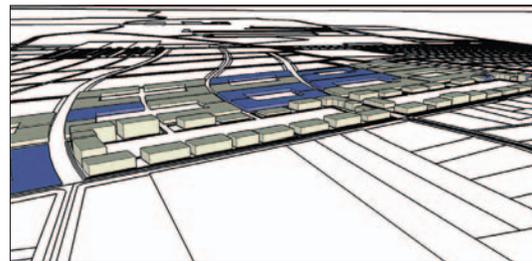
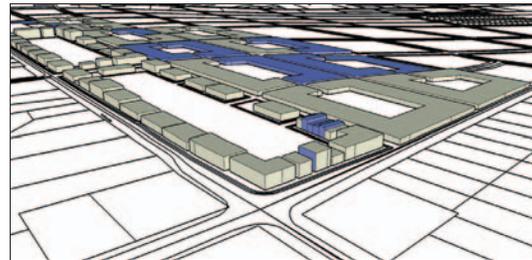
A downtown here could, after a multiyear build-out, fulfill the downtown guiding principles listed above. The key is that no development should occur in the interim that would prevent a downtown project or build on area reserved for future roads.

The concept drawings show a concept of how a downtown could work with a curvilinear street grid. The key elements are

- A street grid with relatively short blocks.
- Buildings built up to the sidewalk.
- Dense housing—attached or detached single-family homes (30–50’-wide lots) and eight to 12 dwelling units per acre and multifamily homes of 18–30 dwelling units per acre.
- There is enough land to accommodate the necessary housing even if some property owners do not decide to participate in creating a downtown (as long as most of them do participate). If they all participate, additional housing would greatly benefit downtown’s vitality and Central’s sustainability.
- Attractive design that makes this density attractive and desirable for all economic groups.

Building a downtown in cooperation with private-sector partners would be a defining challenge for Central. The project’s commercial and residential components are critical to its success.

Building a downtown also would be a dramatic move toward making Central a more sustainable community. Currently the northern half of the city houses approximately 12,000 people and contains some 100,000 square feet of commercial and institutional buildings. Within a decade or so, it would be possible to support this many people and five times as much commercial and institutional buildings on only 0.75 of a square mile. Concentrating new development on this small footprint would reduce the amount of land that would otherwise be lost to development. Reducing development pressures on undeveloped land will help preserve Central’s rural character, and create development producing far less air and water pollution than the more rural and suburban patterns elsewhere in the city.



*Jobs Housing Balance and Downtown Economic Development*

The table below shows that currently there are not nearly enough residents or workers within possible walking distance (one mile) to support downtown. The numbers would be substantially less at 0.5 miles (the distance many residents are willing to walk when it is safe and interesting to do so) or the 0.25 mile (the distance most people will walk if it is safe and interesting to do so).

<b>Table 1. Number of Residents and Workers Near Proposed Downtown Site</b>			
Type of Population	Within one mile	Within two miles	Within three miles
Residential (night time)	<2,000±	17,500±	44,500±
Workers (day time)	<400±	1,800±	3,600±

*Note: Data include some estimates and should be used for planning purposes only.*

To develop a downtown, a minimum of 12,000 people, and preferably 20,000, are needed for long-term sustainability (see the previous design principles).

One of Central’s biggest challenges in becoming a more sustainable community, i.e., reducing traffic congestion and improving the quality of life, is that economically it is a suburban community. Many cities have a fairly good balance of jobs and housing (the ideal from a sustainability standpoint), meaning that there are roughly the same number of workers living in them as work in them. Many core cities have dramatically more jobs than workers. As shown in *Table 1*, Central has a pattern more common to suburban towns in that the vast majority of people commute to work elsewhere, typically at the same time as everyone else, creating congesting and decreasing the quality of life for those commuters.

Creating a true downtown with jobs and housing may be the single most effective economic development measure that Central could do. Although a downtown would create more housing than it would create jobs, it would create many jobs and create a magnet that would make Central more amenity rich and start drawing additional jobs to the community.

The most successful job engine in most communities is to retain jobs locally and encourage local investors and businesspeople to bring their businesses and jobs back home. The services and amenities a downtown can offer make this more likely.

### *Downtown Housing Options*

Central has a relatively small amount of diversity in the type of housing. Eighty-five percent of Central's housing is owner-occupied. Approximately 80 percent of Central's housing is in single-family home subdivisions. Many Central residents, however, are sensitive to the need for housing for Central's service sector and retail employees (e.g., Wal-Mart employees who might not otherwise be able to live in the community) and for their own sons and daughters starting independent households and possibly otherwise unable to live in town.

There are three basic ways the community can lower the price of housing for those in the greatest need:

- Lower the price of land. Typically this is done by providing developers with a greater allowable density of housing as long as some of the homes are set aside for lower-cost households. Many communities tie this to a deed restriction to ensure that homes designed for lower-income residents remain affordable to those new lower-income residents even when they come back on the market. In the downtown, allowing density of up to 30 dwelling units per acre will lower the cost of land per unit, whether or not affordable deed restrictions are required.
- Provide smaller homes. The smaller the home, the lower the cost, all other factors being equal. When developers get the same number of units per acre, regardless of house size, there is a tendency to want to sell the largest house the market will support. Incentives for smaller living units, whether it be encouraging apartments upstairs from commercial space in the downtown or allowing accessory ("mother-in-law") apartments can encourage the market to create more lower-cost units.
- Subsidize housing. Low-income housing tax credits is the largest federal program for creating affordable housing. Tax incentives allow developers to create affordable units, typically in mixed-income buildings. Downtown should not all be subsidized units but a portion of the units can and should be subsidized. This will help quickly get housing density up to what is necessary to maintain a downtown.

### **Immediate Next Steps to Create the Downtown Central Triangle**

The most important step to creating a downtown is a shared community vision. The vision must be realistic, considering market realities and infrastructure costs, but should include the big dream for the future. Central has one opportunity to do it right.

Central will want to consider some or all of the following first steps to create a downtown:

- Consult Downtown Triangle property owners to gauge their interest and support for developing or selling their properties for a downtown. Lack of current interest does not mean the interest will not develop as the project proceeds and becomes a proven project.
- Identify full environmental and site constraints. Although the site lacks the environmental limitations of the other candidate sites, it may contain some limited wetlands, an oil well, and some historic structures. All of these site limitations can be addressed but they must first be understood.
- Implement a business calling program to understand the needs of likely business tenants and identify some of those tenants. Interview Central residents who own any retail, hospitality, service, or office use in Central or elsewhere to understand their interest and what they would need to move their business downtown. Interview other desirable businesses in the Baton Rouge area to find out what they want and need.
- Do not be constrained by current market demand. On the one hand, it is critical to understand existing market demand, both through a business calling program and the kind of more detailed market analysis that prospective tenants and possibly the city might undertake. On the other hand, a local market analysis only looks at existing commercial models. There are companies that specialize in market analysis for market niches that are not currently in the area but are thriving in other markets.
- Add the Downtown Triangle to the comprehensive plan currently being written by the Moore Planning Group.

- Adopt zoning, subdivision regulations, and design guidelines consistent with the above guiding principles. Zoning should use build-to lines (maximum 10-foot setbacks and a minimum height of 30 feet) and a maximum height of 65 feet or more. Commercial (retail or other) should be required on the first floor in the commercial core area, with any other commercial or residential use allowed above the first floor, all by right. Adjacent to the commercial core, there should be a dense residential housing district with some mixed use allowed and with the same dimensional standards. Housing density is critical for downtown. With extensive on-street parking, consider not requiring any off street parking or only minimal requirements and leave it to the market. Consider not creating any maximum housing density. Street design within subdivisions should include 11-foot travel lanes, at least six-foot-wide concrete sidewalks, granite or concrete curbs, tree belts, on-street back-in angle parking, no dead-end streets, and a maximum of one curb cut per block face. Design standards should be created either as part of zoning or as a separate set of regulations. Most of the work for drafting these standards has already been completed in the applicable sections of the *Louisiana Speaks Pattern* book and the pattern book should be used to create the final standards.
- Include a focus on public spaces such as pocket parks, landmark features, and urban amenities. A large park is not needed but small comfortable pockets for people to meet and see other people is critical.
- Make the intersection of Hooper and Sullivan much more pedestrian friendly, especially creating a connection between downtown and the current middle school site and the current commercial areas on Sullivan. See the Transportation section of this report for more details.

## SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

### **An Opportunity Seized**

Central's independence poises its school system to emerge as Louisiana's highest-performing school district (the Central school system already ahead of Zachary, La., academically.)

### **Physical Needs**

Central's four public school facilities need varying levels of rehabilitation. Tear down the middle school. The deferred maintenance at the middle school is striking and, given the extent of the problem, the school should be torn down. It is probably affecting student outlook; addressing this is a dire need. A new high school could be built adjacent to its original location, next to the stadium. The existing building housing the high school could then be reconfigured into the new middle school. The two elementary schools are serviceable but are nearing the end of their useful life cycle (they were built in the 1960s–1970s eras). As such, the community needs to initiate a dialogue to decide whether these schools should be renovated or rebuilt.

### **Locations**

The placement of Central's elementary schools represents a planning challenge. Central's citizens don't often move so neighborhoods go through cycles of having many school-age children to none, and then back again. Small neighborhood facilities can allow some children to walk safely to school but Central covers a large, sparsely settled area of 60 square miles. With few schools overall, locating facilities near the town center makes sense. The city should consider land swaps with developers to enable school relocations.

There may be opportunities to use large, presently open land tracts as multiple school campuses (clusters), sharing resources such as athletic fields, libraries, theaters, and each others' "flex spaces."

### **Construction Best Practices**

There is a revolution under way in materials and systems available for use in building construction. When designing and building schools, best practices by architects and engineers should be mandatory and should feature high-performance buildings and energy alternatives. The full exploration of green standards and site-specific opportunities

should be required. The buildings should have maximal day lighting and managed ventilation to ensure highest possible air quality. The use of chemically stable, nonvolatile products and the most durable finishes available, instead of cheaper, shorter lasting ones (e.g., terrazzo flooring instead of carpet) should also be required.

### **Consider Alternatives for All Students**

Not every child learns best the same way or has the same interests. Making school and learning exciting and relevant needs to be planned. Consider ways of allowing students to make better use of the community’s skill assets—this is not just a “vo-tech” mindset. Lifelong learning is a goal for the whole community. Consider “small school” approaches by working to minimize student-to-teacher ratios. Budget savings elsewhere can be used to lower this ratio. Get the local community colleges involved in Central’s education mission. The concept of adult education should be revisited, as it can be a community benefit.

In the discussion of Central’s school system, it is important to also consider private educational programs in addition to those offered by the public school system. For example, home-schooled children will come in and out of public schools (ideally) or participate in some aspects of the city system. Private Montessori schools work for many younger students before their entrance into the public school system. Given the large number of churches and religious organizations within Central, private faith-based schools are clearly an important part of the community’s educational system.

### **Planning Weaknesses, Strengths, and Opportunities**

Generally Central’s weaknesses with respect to education and school facilities are the same as for other community aspects:

- Uncontrolled growth
- Wetlands and flooding
- Lack of a town center
- Traffic problems



On the other hand, Central can boast the following significant strengths as it approaches education and school facility planning needs:

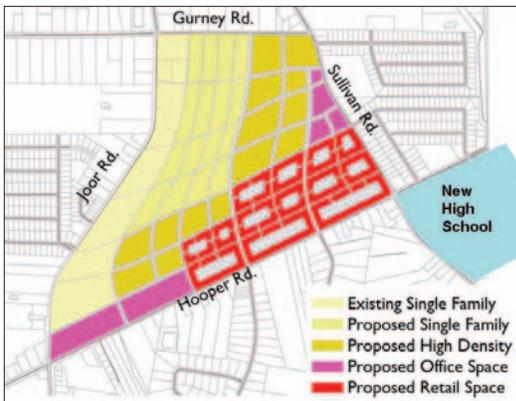


- A clean planning slate
- Historically great schools
- New control of local destiny
- Rural orientation, available land
- Active stakeholders
- Natural resources
- Excellent Louisiana planning resources



The Central school system also has great opportunities for a synergy with Central’s community needs:

- A new Central high school near a designated town center
- A chance to capitalize on existing city excitement over high school sports and performing arts
- Stadium and planned “tailgating” facility
- New school location
- More Little League (baseball) fields
- Performing arts center/community theater
- An auditorium for town hall meetings
- Opportunities for ecology-related programs (i.e., green roofs, eco-agriculture, and nature trails (for biology and science classes))



### How Schools Affect Demographics and the Tax Base

Good schools attract young families to a community but the cost of educating children can exceed the additional taxes new young residents pay. As a result, there can be a disconnect between the needs of the older citizens and the needs of young families, with older citizens faced with increased taxes to accommodate the needs of a growing school system while simultaneously facing a paucity of the resources they need to remain within the community (i.e., plan to site nursing homes, hospitals and clinics, and assisted living facilities). Facilities for older citizens that help diversify the local economy and create

jobs (e.g., caregivers, interns, administrators) can be placed close to schools. Quasi-public institutions that offer educational opportunities for interested teens tie in to school and church groups and strengthen a central place architecturally and can also serve a variety of needs and work best when placed in close proximity to schools.

### **Community Benefits of a Healthy School System**

Fostering a healthy school system ultimately creates benefits for the entire community. The city's business community is able to attract a better-educated local employee base, and highly desired prospective employees are more willing to relocate to the Central area in order to take advantage of the education opportunities. Private property owners experience better resale around vital schools. Local governments can point to educational successes and leverage additional funding and commitments. Retirees and grandparents can contribute by volunteering time, and teachers, unburdened by school problems, can focus on students and have more enjoyable, inspiring careers. Schools can also contribute to the cultural opportunities within the community, providing activities for those interested in sports, music, dance, and drama. It has also been shown the good schools correlate to lower crime rates within communities, creating a benefit that affects all of the residents.

### **Next Steps**

- Maintain student focus.
- Explore and allow for holistic school models.
- Focus on a long-range capital plan and initial correction of deferred maintenance work. Repairs to the elementary school heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system should take precedent, as should the potential demolition of the middle school and the planning for a new high school facility.
- Secure and budget major funding.
- Prepare a relocation plan (plan for phasing and relocating facilities). A centrally located cluster of schools would require major land acquisition. Is there a 300-acre parcel to plan around?
- Coordinate with city master plan and the proposed new town center.
- Explore elementary school site/land swaps.
- Adopt a continuous planning process to address the coming "known unknowns." Keep the school planning process active and connected. Welcome and educate new stakeholders.

# COMMUNITY LIVABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

## The Sanctuary: Central's Sense of Place

Central is just beginning to write its history but the collective will that drove residents to begin anew runs deep. Creating the elusive yet unmistakable Central style will be something that evolves organically over time.

“People cannot maintain their spiritual roots and their connections to the past if the physical world they live in does not also sustain these roots.”

*Christopher Alexander, Pattern Language*

The first act as a community is to define and celebrate boundaries. Central's advantage is the fact that it already has some natural gateways. Part of creating a sense of place is differentiating one place from another. Subtle yet discernable clues throughout Central will reinforce for residents and

visitors what the community values. These could be as simple as street signs with the Central crest on them, lighting, street furniture, trash and recycling receptacles, planters at gateways and downtown, sidewalk paving, benches, trees, signage on businesses, or a series of public spaces. Just as a speed limit sign tells drivers to adjust accordingly, so clues will remind people they are somewhere special, whether they live in Central or are just visiting. Those clues will also affect how the city presents itself and say something about the community to newcomers and visitors. With time this will become part of Central's vernacular.

It goes without saying that Central would greatly benefit by incorporating the AIA's 10 principles for livable communities in the comprehensive plan and all design standards:

1. Design on a human scale
2. Provide choices for all residents
3. Encourage mixed-use development
4. Create and preserve the urban and village center
5. Vary transportation options
6. Build vibrant public spaces
7. Create neighborhood identities
8. Protect environmental resources
9. Conserve the natural landscape
10. Support, as a community, the value and importance of design

## A Central Vernacular: Architecture Shapes a Community

Central has the opportunity to create a local vernacular that can respond to the community's values and address the ongoing threat of flooding and severe weather. With a better understanding of climate, new technologies, and renewable materials, there is a perfect opportunity to define a new vernacular that responds to current energy and climate trends. Subtle details individually don't amount to much but as a whole create a recognizable pattern, style, or vernacular. Traditionally building knowledge was handed down through architectural treatises and pattern books. This lost tradition has been renewed in the *Louisiana Speaks Pattern Book and Planning Guideline*. These resources are available as a starting point, and as the city begins to build its civic space it can develop design standards that will inform the "Central vernacular." The city will not want to impose the same design on everyone but through form-based zoning, landscape, lighting, and signage guidelines a pattern can begin to evolve that will help define the public realm in a way unique to Central. For private residential development, setbacks, height restrictions, and lot coverage can create uniformity but again it will be the landscape details that will foster the development of a "Central style."

*Vernacular—Etymology: Latin: vernāculus, native.*

A style of architecture exemplifying the commonest techniques, decorative features, and materials of a particular historical period, region, or group of people.

Of or being an indigenous building style using local materials and traditional methods of construction and ornament, especially as distinguished from academic or historical architectural styles.

Occurring or existing in a particular locality.

"Because the urban landscape stimulates visual memory, it is an important but underutilized resource for public history."

*Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place*

As a community Central also will want to foster certain traditions in a specific place to create a lasting visual memory that over time will be identified as unique to Central. Place-connected experiences create the lasting memories. This same place-connected visual memory also will support the sanctuary and the sense of place and being "home" for residents.

With education being a core value in Central, one cannot underestimate the power of architecture and landscape to teach. Many opportunities exist for passive learning throughout the built environment, particularly about protecting the environment, wildlife, history, culture, and community core values. As the built environment fosters civic activity, it also has the power to inform and shape it. Again the landscape vernacular will be the easiest most public way of creating the Central vernacular.

## **Housing Affordability—Alternatives for All Ages**

An important priority for the city should be to ensure there is a variety of housing types, with opportunities for singles, couples, families with children, and group households.

As a policy, be certain to accommodate all ages, from infants to the very old; inde-

“A simple social intercourse created when people rub shoulders in public is one of the most essential kinds of social ‘glue’ in society.”

*Christopher Alexander, A Pattern Language*

pendent to infirm. Set the scale to meet the needs of each age group and make certain that each age group can easily and spontaneously interact on a regular basis. Each neighborhood should include a well-mixed variety of people. Adopting this vision will also keep Central more affordable for all. Many successful alternative home ownership

models, such as cohousing and in-law apartments, can provide affordable housing for nontraditional households. These models will need to be included in the city’s bylaws and design standards. Broadening the population base can reduce the burden on schools and provide a more socially sustainable community.

## **Passive Survivability**

Global warming is changing the face of weather, and although Central is inland from the coast it is still subject to the whims of Mother Nature. Increased development will only exacerbate the situation as larger areas are built up, reducing the region’s overall capacity to absorb stormwater. Central’s strong desire for quality and durability can be translated into communitywide support of a green building policy for all public construction. Taking green building one step further to include off-grid alternative energy supplies would provide an invaluable service for the community during emergency situations, specifically for fire, police, and emergency shelters. Green building strategies can also be another aspect of Central’s vernacular.

## **Economic Development**

As Central grows over time it will feel the fiscal pressures common to most cities. Within a sustainable framework the city can implement specific growth policies that support economic development without compromising the quality of life cherished by the community. Economically, less can be more. The growing desire for the benefits of economic sustainability around the country has created a shift in thinking in many communities, which most developers can support. Any growth should continually balance the need for fiscal solvency with the need for a strong civic center and vibrant neighborhoods.

Effective and proven sustainable approaches to economic development include the following regulatory and market-based tools:

- Solid zoning and comprehensive land-use planning bylaws and design guidelines that support Central’s vision and provide developers with a clear road map to project approval. These by-laws also should incorporate smart-growth strategies.
- Environmental protection and greenway zone development guidelines. Incorporate flood mitigation guidelines in all bylaws that include stormwater swales, increased tree planting, and reduced impermeable surfaces. (*See details in Natural Resources.*)
- Private-sector involvement in public-private partnerships. This includes partnership development and market-based tax incentives.
- Economic incentives that encourage growth and development that is consistent with the city’s overall sustainable vision for its future.
- Green building programs can support Central’s desire for sustainability and provide an extra level of survivability during storms. All public buildings should embrace passive climate control as well as alternative energy back-up power. The city should require underground utilities in the downtown center and all new development throughout the community.
- Local commerce is supported through mixed-use zoning and design guidelines. Village centers and downtown business districts are conducive to small locally owned businesses. Signage and lighting in design guidelines should give equal visibility to small-scale and large-scale businesses.
- Creation of an eco-industrial park as an opportunity zone within a city. This could be coupled with a model vocational learning program for area students and craftsmen.

## MOVING FORWARD

The SDAT process has confirmed an existing consensus of core values that define Central and a set of priorities for residents as their city begins to take shape. Central is about education but, above all, it is about people and the care and respect they have for each other.

“Vision is not seeing things as they are but as they will be.”

*Anonymous*

“Without common land no social system can survive.”

*Christopher Alexander,  
The Pattern Language*

All cities start as towns and grow organically one step at a time. Civic leaders should not be afraid to put the brakes on when needed; and should be selective and regularly reconfirm the roots of the city’s core values and vision. What are the city’s essential values and how do they translate into the built environment and sense of place? How does the built environment continue to support and foster those values for all citizens of Central? It is important to create and acknowledge a visible history of Central; that is

the glue that will bind citizens to the city over time. The continued presence in the built environment of the city’s core values will assist in its future development.

### **Think Regionally, Act Locally**

Central should partner with other cities and towns in the region to work as a region and avoid unnecessary duplication of larger-scale services, while maintaining each city’s individual identity. The city should work with parish and state government to control traffic and roadway development to protect the city’s core and the vitality of Central’s neighborhoods. As the East Baton Rouge Area Chamber moves ahead with its 2007 agenda, Central must stay connected as a key player in the region, especially in regard to

- Student achievement in public schools
- Regional workforce solutions
- State transportation funding
- Small business resource center
- Business recruitment

### **Complete the Comprehensive Plan**

- Plan for the future in a big way and set aside public land now for future neighborhood schools, public parks, and civic space. This will be a critical tool in maintaining the country feel for future generations.
- Envision a walkable downtown commercial core and a civic center with tree-lined boulevards and a vibrant mix of activities.
- Plan for connected greenways and set aside land for community-supported agriculture.

### **Develop Zoning Ordinances and Design Standards**

The necessity of these bylaws cannot be underestimated. Once a road is in place or building is built, its permanence is virtually insurmountable. A community should not be afraid to support growth it wants, or to say no to growth that does not meet its goals.

### **Cultivate the “Central Vernacular”**

The most beloved areas of Central are defined by tree-lined streets and shady wooded areas. Trees take a long time to grow. Tree planting is one of the most accessible character-defining activities the citizens of Central can undertake now for future generations. An annual Greening Central event would be an excellent way to landscape the vast stretches of open roadways and create a living history that connects residents to their civic space. A specially planted tree is always remembered, often through generations. Just as Central Cooks has become a hallmark event, this too can become part of the city’s collective history.

Central will face many challenges in the coming months and years as it begins to give form to its vision in the comprehensive plan and development of bylaws. The start of the new school year for the newly formed Central School District will also bring its challenges. The not-in-my-backyard syndrome, the “tragedy of the commons,” and transboundary impacts are all threats to local sustainability that could emerge in Central’s future.

All of the topics addressed in this report are interdependent in their impact on Central’s future and interconnected in their solutions. For Central to move ahead with its vision, it will need to continue taking action in a bold way. Cultivating “sustainable thinking” will be critical to long-term success. Some aspects of strategic sustainable thinking

have been embraced by leaders and citizens in other towns and cities. Taken as a whole these have proven very successful in communities around the globe:

- Challenge conventional thinking and practice. Don't be afraid to think outside of the box; don't feel the need to always stay inside the lines.
- Consider the community's long-and short-term well-being when making decisions or plans. They are equally important.
- When making decisions about core issues think strategically, think sustainably.
- Always consider the interdependent nature of problems and their solutions.
- Proceed cautiously with all decisions and be prepared for surprises. Things are not always as simple as they appear.
- Limits and constraints can provide limitless creative innovation and solutions.
- The means and the ends are forcibly interconnected and neither should compromise each other or the bigger picture.
- Central's view of sustainability will be a reflection of its own needs as well as a more global universal goal.
- Sustainability is an open-ended proposition, ever evolving and adaptable to the situation at hand.

The SDAT hopes this report will assist Central in fulfilling its new potential as a city. Cities are born of a deep humanity and desire for civic intercourse. Current trends can easily efface the humanity of a city as it loses sight of its roots with often mechanized responses to pragmatic needs and fiscal responsibilities. It is our hope the Central spirit will remain true to its core values over time and resist those pressures that can so easily erode foundations or vision.

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