

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

Next Steps for Building a Thriving, Connected Super Region
between New Orleans and Baton Rouge

July 2011



The final installment in a three-part series on how expanded transportation choices can strengthen communities and increase opportunity for the people and businesses of greater Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

A project of
The logo features a stylized graphic of a road or path leading towards a central point, composed of various line segments and dots. To the right of the graphic, the text "Center for" is written in a small, italicized font, followed by "Planning Excellence" in a larger, bold, sans-serif font.

This report is the final installment in a three-part series of policy briefs that explore the opportunity for the New Orleans and Baton Rouge regions to develop an integrated, regional transportation network that supports strong communities and improves opportunity for the region's residents and businesses. The first two briefs, which provide the background and context for this discussion, are available at connect.cpex.org

This project was commissioned by CONNECT, a coalition that works across the New Orleans and Baton Rouge regions to advocate for expanded mobility choices that offer improved access to affordable homes, job centers and equitable economic opportunity. The CONNECT Coalition is made up of a diverse group of public and private sector organizations from Baton Rouge, New Orleans and the communities in between.

CONNECT is a project of the Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX). CPEX helps create highly functional, equitable communities throughout Louisiana that capitalize on their unique qualities through community-driven planning and implementation. We provide best-practice planning models, innovative policy ideas, and technical assistance to individual communities that wish to create and enact master plans dealing with transportation and infrastructure needs, equitable housing opportunities, environmental issues, and quality design for the built environment. CPEX brings community members and leaders together and provides guidance as they work toward a shared vision for future growth and development.

For more information on this report or the CONNECT Coalition, contact CPEX at connect@cpex.org

or visit:

connect.cpex.org

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This report was prepared by Reconnecting America, a national nonprofit that is helping to transform promising ideas into thriving communities—where transportation choices make it easy to get from place to place, where businesses flourish, and where people from all walks of life can afford to live, work and visit.

www.reconnectingamerica.org

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Background

The Louisiana Speaks recovery planning initiative involved more than a year of public engagement with over 27,000 citizens, making it the largest redevelopment, recovery and planning effort in American history. One of the clear messages of the Louisiana Speaks Plan was a call for improved transportation choices that support quality-of-life and economic prosperity in southern Louisiana. This series of policy briefs and the ongoing efforts of the CONNECT Coalition are a response to that call. Faced with economic strains, rising gas prices, crippling congestion and an aging population, communities around the U.S. are taking action by making targeted investments in transit and planning for walkable, affordable, transit-oriented communities. Investing in and planning for these types of communities – collectively called sustainable regional development – can lead to increased job access, reduced household transportation costs, strengthened local and regional economies, improved health and air quality, reduced congestion and other benefits. The Baton Rouge and New Orleans super region has a tremendous opportunity to take advantage of these benefits and to serve as a national leader in the movement toward sustainable regional development.

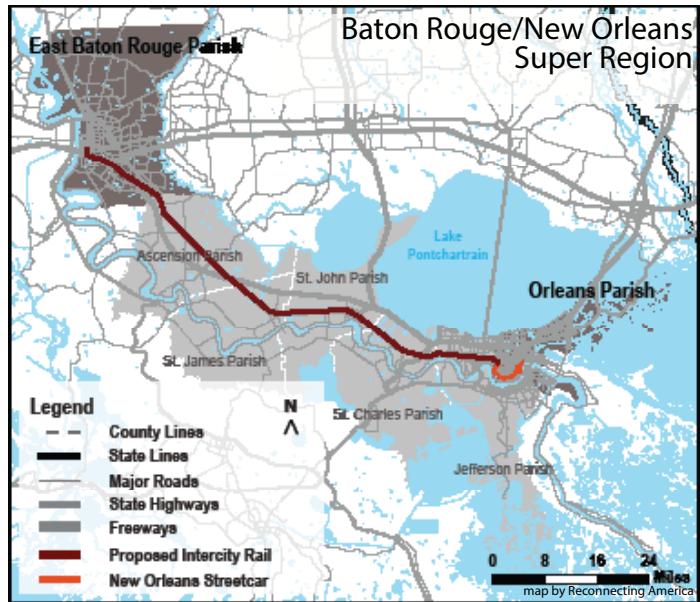
As discussed in the first two briefs in this series, there are three particular areas of investment that will be necessary in order to achieve these benefits in the greater metro areas of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. First, both Baton Rouge and New Orleans need enhanced local and regional transit service. Second, plans and policies at the city, parish and regional levels must be aligned to support affordable, walkable, transit-oriented communities, both in existing neighborhoods and in areas of new development. Third, the super region must work together to improve connectivity between Louisiana's two largest economic centers by implementing commuter rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

The first two briefs in this three-part series provide the context for this discussion and give more detail on the three goals outlined above.

The first brief, "One Great Region," makes the case for improved transportation choices and coordinated regional planning in the Baton Rouge/New Orleans super region.

The second brief, "Connected and Ready to Compete," discusses the role of transit and coordinated regional planning in the economic future of greater Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Read the first two briefs at:
connect.cpx.org



This brief outlines six critical next steps that the Baton Rouge/New Orleans super region can take in order to move toward these three goals. The recommended next steps are:

1. Expand Education and Outreach on Transit and Transit-Oriented Development
2. Develop a Commuter Rail Implementation Strategy for the Baton Rouge to New Orleans Rail Project
3. Form a Regional Commuter Rail Advisory Council
4. Prioritize Investments and Policies that Improve Walkability and Bicycle Access
5. Develop a Transit-Oriented Development Strategic Plan
6. Conduct a Scenario-based Cost Benefit Analysis for Mobility in the NO to BR Corridor

This brief identifies the key public, private, nonprofit and community stakeholders who will need to be a part of each step and suggests a general timeline for each action. The steps identified here are not necessarily sequential, nor are they the only actions that are needed to achieve the goals described above. They have been recommended as priority actions based on steps taken in other U.S. regions seeking to accomplish similar goals. The implementation of these recommendations will be an ongoing process taking anywhere from 6 months to 5 years or more and will require a coordinated effort from multiple stakeholders to ensure momentum and completion.

Implementation Principles

There are three key implementation principles that are fundamental to all of the recommended next steps. These principles should be addressed on an ongoing basis and should remain at the heart of any planning, or policy and investment decisions that have implications for the communities of greater Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

1. Engage a diverse range of stakeholders

Sustainable regional development cannot be accomplished using the siloed approach that has been common in the past, where transportation and land use decisions are made independent of one another, and where transportation practitioners focus only on transportation projects, housing providers work exclusively on housing projects, etc. Furthermore, sustainable regional development cannot be accomplished alone by the public sector. Linking plans and investments for transportation, housing and other infrastructure with community goals around economic growth, health, equity and the environment requires a collaborative approach that brings together practitioners from many sectors, fields and levels (i.e. local, regional, state and federal), as well as community organizations and the public. In this regard, the expansive and inclusive planning process used to develop the Louisiana Speaks Plan can serve as a model for future community development efforts.

While there are many different types of stakeholders that need to be part of this effort, the role of four particular groups could be explored or strengthened in BR/NO:

- Regional Agencies: Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) provide technical and planning support to local governments and can create programs that distribute funds for transit supportive plans and infrastructure. Regional agencies also play an important role in convening elected officials on issues of regional significance. It is important that the three MPOs along the proposed commuter rail line – Capital Region Planning Commission, South Central Planning and Development Commission and New Orleans Regional Planning Commission – play a leading role in bringing diverse stakeholders together to work toward coordinated transportation and land use investments, and also work with one another on issues that impact the larger super region.

- Private Sector Leaders: Private developers of housing, office, retail, and other uses are some of the primary implementers of local and regional plans for sustainable development. Also, many of the benefits of sustainable regional development will be realized by the region's employers (as discussed in brief two). Real estate professionals and business leaders can bring invaluable market-based perspective to local and regional planning efforts and can provide the private capital necessary to implement new development and community projects near transit.
- Non-Profit and Philanthropic Organizations: Non-profit groups can use their organizing resources to support community engagement in local and regional planning processes, and have been able to help implement plans by supporting desirable development projects. Around the U.S., foundations are partnering with public and non-profit groups and pooling their resources to support sustainable regional development. For these reasons, non-profits and foundations are increasingly at the table alongside public sector players. Historically in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, foundations and non-profits have been instrumental in convening the public around important community issues. Their role will remain critical as the super region crafts and implements a new vision for transit, connected communities and commuter rail.
- General Public: The general public must be engaged early, often, and in a meaningful way. Residents, workers, and employers, young or old, rich or poor, all have a stake in seeing transit and community investments made wisely. Creating a robust and accessible public-engagement strategy will be a key early action in many of the recommended next steps for the Baton Rouge/New Orleans super region.



Louisiana Speaks participants (photo by CPEX)

2. Keep the “big picture” in mind when making investment and development decisions

There are already a number of regional and local plans in greater Baton Rouge and New Orleans that call for improved transit connections and other elements of sustainable regional development. For example, the draft vision for the East Baton Rouge Parish Comprehensive Plan, FUTUREBR, features a set of “Core Values and Dreams” that include goals such as, “Equity: All residents have access to a good education, public services, housing and job opportunities,” and “Convenient Transportation: People and goods have new choices, as well as improved existing ways to move throughout the parish.”¹ Similarly in New Orleans, the city’s Master Plan, adopted in 2010, outlines a vision for the city’s future that includes goals such as, “(In 2030), New Orleans is a place where everyone can walk to transit, shopping and parks.”²

The value of these and other plans, however, lies in their implementation. Furthermore, these goals do not represent the path of least resistance; it will take a committed and sustained effort from public agency staff and elected leaders, as well as the private sector, non-profits, philanthropic community and neighborhood leaders, to implement these plans. It is likely that unique, multidisciplinary partnerships will be necessary. Because individual development projects, transportation investments and community policies add up to make the region what it is, it is important for decision-makers at the local, regional, state and even federal level to “check” individual investment and development decisions against the goals and vision outlined in these aspirational planning documents.



FUTUREBR Public Workshop (photo by FUTUREBR.com)

3. Ensure that plans, policies and investments benefit everyone

Investing in transit and in affordable, walkable, transit-oriented communities can bring many economic benefits to the businesses, governments and individuals of the super region. It is essential that people of all incomes can take advantage of the lower cost of living and improved job access that comes from living near transit. This means that regional policies and investments must provide people from all walks of life with quality housing and transportation choices. Transit expansion plans must serve existing communities of all incomes, and people at all wage levels must have access to high-quality housing in accessible, walkable neighborhoods. Communities located near transit should also include a range of housing types that will attract many types of households including renters, owners, families, singles, and older residents. Since new transit investments can lead to increased property values near stations, preserving affordability in communities located near future transit stations will be an especially important consideration.

Since Hurricane Katrina, steady infusions of federal housing funds and tax credits have helped New Orleans redevelop its four largest public housing projects into mixed-income communities. In general, these projects are located in walkable environments with some level of transit service. The new streetcar lines and redevelopment efforts like BioDistrict New Orleans create the need for efforts to preserve affordability in existing neighborhoods in New Orleans, and may also create an opportunity for the city to leverage private investment to secure new affordable units near transit. In Baton Rouge, much of the public housing is located in places disconnected from convenient transit service or in places that are not within walking distance of services or jobs. As the recent update of the comprehensive plan for the parish demonstrated, Baton Rouge has the opportunity to reevaluate its approach to affordable housing by creating mixed-income communities in walkable locations, and targeting these locations for improved future transit service. There is also the possibility that the development of high-quality, mixed-income housing could help jumpstart redevelopment efforts around the downtown area.

¹ FUTUREBR, “A Vision for East Baton Rouge,” Spring 2011 Draft (page 11), www.futurebr.com.

² New Orleans Master Plan, “New Orleans’ Plan for the 21st Century, Executive Summary” (page 14) Adopted August 2010.

Next Steps

1. Expand Education and Outreach on Transit and Transit-Oriented Development

Timeline: Near-term, ongoing

Key Actors: The CONNECT Coalition with support from City and Parish staff, MPOs, Elected Leaders, Capital Area Transit System, New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, Center for Planning Excellence, Philanthropic Community

Education and outreach are needed in order to develop public and political support for future transit and community investments. Education and outreach are also important ways to cultivate community champions. Community change can be scary or threatening, but when community leaders understand the benefits that transit and transit-oriented development provide, they can become spokespeople for more transit, better zoning and new community investment. Education and outreach activities might include regular letters to the editor, community charrettes, targeted round-table discussions with key groups (i.e. businesses along proposed transit corridors, neighborhood associations), exploratory trips to model transit regions or sponsorships for key players to attend national conferences. The CONNECT Coalition was formed in order to bring awareness to these issues and will continue to provide education and outreach activities in the coming years. Public sector players, such as the Capital Region Planning Commission and the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission, also have a key role in this effort.

One particular area of focus for an education and outreach campaign should be building support and awareness around issues of transit funding. In particular, both New Orleans and Baton Rouge are currently facing significant challenges regarding funding for operating the transit system. Baton Rouge does not have a dedicated source of local funds for transit operations, meaning that the Capital Area Transit System relies on funds from the city, state and federal government, which vary from year to year. A sales tax in New Orleans and a portion of a property tax in Jefferson Parish are dedicated to transit operations, but overall sales tax revenues in New Orleans stopped growing in 2008 and were roughly eight percent less in 2010 than they were in 2005.³ Due to severe funding constraints, the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority operates about 60 percent of the fixed-route service it did pre-Katrina⁴, despite the fact that New Orleans' population has rebounded to 78 percent of pre-storm levels.⁵

Facing similar challenges, many communities undertake campaigns to pass local taxes to support transit. Sales and property taxes are common but states and localities are increasingly pursuing non-traditional mechanisms, such as taxes on vehicle emissions, car rentals, hotel rooms or payrolls. (In Baton Rouge, a Blue Ribbon Commission recently evaluated the feasibility of various transit funding mechanisms to support Capital Area Transit System.) No matter what funding mechanism a locality decides to pursue, education, outreach and marketing will be key elements of a successful campaign. The Center for Transportation Excellence (CTFE), a national non-profit that monitors and studies transit ballot measures, suggests that successful transit campaigns often rely on a local champion or spokesperson who voters can connect with; have a strategic and inclusive public involvement campaign; and respond quickly to concerns and opposition voiced by the community.⁶ CTFE highlights the creative outreach strategies used in Denver during the 2004 FasTracks campaign, a successful initiative to pass a 0.4 percent sales tax increase to support the construction of a regional transit network.⁷ The FasTracks outreach campaign included a "Speakers Bureau" of 150 individuals trained to give presentations on the campaign, strategically-timed television commercials, and a "Business on Board" plan focused on gathering endorsements from local government and business leaders, among other strategies.

For more information about the
Center for Transportation Excellence, visit:
www.ctfe.org

³ Plyer, Allison, "News Release: Facts for Features," Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, August 26, 2010. www.gnocdc.org

⁴ New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Ridership Report, 2010. www.norta.com/

⁵ Plyer, Allison, "News Release: Facts for Features," Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, August 26, 2010. www.gnocdc.org

⁶ Center for Transportation Excellence, "Eleven Keys to Success for Local Transit Elections," 2006. www.ctfe.org

⁷ Center for Transportation Excellence, "Building Communities Through Public Transportation: A Guide for Successful Transit Initiatives," 2005. www.ctfe.org

2. Develop a Commuter Rail Implementation Strategy for the Baton Rouge to New Orleans Rail Project

Timeline: Near-term

Key Actors: Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact

A Commuter Rail Implementation Strategy is the next step toward bringing the proposed Baton Rouge-New Orleans Rail project into reality. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) recommends this type of strategy, sometimes called a “corridor transportation plan,” for regions planning new or enhanced passenger rail service.⁸ This strategy would build upon the Feasibility Study prepared in 2009 for the Southern High-Speed Rail Commission and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.⁹ The Commuter Rail Implementation Strategy could be the first action undertaken by the Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact, a quasi-governmental entity that would be responsible for planning and implementing the passenger rail system. The formation of the Rail Compact was approved by the New Orleans City Council in April 2011 and other parishes along the corridor, including Baton Rouge, are expected to join.

A Commuter Rail Implementation Strategy would be the next step in preparing the project to initiate the federally-required environmental review process and potentially to apply for federal capital funding. The strategy should include:

- An operating service plan that would allow passenger and freight service to coexist on the same tracks. This service plan will provide a framework for the development of operating agreements between the rail corridor owners (Kansas City Southern Rail Network [KCS] and Canadian National Railway [CN]), the operator (likely Amtrak) and the Rail Compact. To initiate a productive long-term dialogue and lay the foundation for future operating agreements, it will be an important early step for the Mayors of New Orleans and Baton Rouge to meet with executives at KCS and CN, to demonstrate the cities’ firm commitment to this project and to initiate negotiations related to track improvements and operating arrangements.
- An evaluation of connectivity issues between stations and critical adjacent ridership-generating destinations. Intermodal and pedestrian improvements in station areas should be considered fundamental elements of implementing rail service on the corridor. Examples of important connections include the potential link between the Kenner Station and Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport; from the proposed Baton Rouge terminal station to downtown BR and to LSU; and between



A proposed streetcar along Nicholson Dr. in Baton Rouge would provide a connection between LSU and downtown
(image from FutureBR)

the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal and major employment centers that are not on streetcar routes, such as the Elmwood area or the University of New Orleans.

This step will require the engagement of the communities around the planned stations in communities like Gonzales and LaPlace where the exact station locations are yet to be identified.

- Preliminary engineering to further explore the scope and cost of near-, mid- and long-term project elements such as track upgrades and signal system improvements.
- A “grade crossing plan” that analyzes sight lines, traffic issues, circulation and safety needs related to each of the locations where the rail line crosses a road, highway or pedestrian pathway. Closing at-grade crossings can be a challenging local issue and the appropriate treatment must be determined on a case-by-case basis. When feasible, however, closed crossings can lead to improved travel times and safety on the rail corridor. For this reason, for example, the state of Mississippi pays localities \$80,000 per eliminated road crossing.

⁸ Federal Railroad Administration, “Railroad Corridor Transportation Plans, A Guidance Manual,” July 8, 2010.

⁹ The Southern High-Speed Rail Commission and The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, “Feasibility Study, Baton-Rouge-New Orleans High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail,” prepared by Burk-Kleinpeter, Inc., December 2009.

- A preliminary assessment of environmental and historic impacts. Projects that will seek federal funding must obtain clearance through a number of federal laws including the National Environmental Protection Act, the National Historic Preservation Act and others. In preparation for the environmental review process and these other federally-required steps, the Corridor Transportation Plan should include a preliminary assessment of environmentally or historically sensitive resources along the route.
- A prioritized list and timeline for track upgrades and other necessary improvements. Many implementation strategies analyze improvements and rank them based on cost per minute saved. FRA also recommends that regions prioritize projects by sorting them based on those that are less likely to impact environmentally or historically sensitive resources (for example: installing welded rail, replacing ties, installing new signal systems or reinstalling track on an old roadbed) versus those that are more likely to need more environmental documentation (for example: new stations, curve eliminations, new maintenance shops).¹⁰
- A funding strategy. The 2009 Feasibility Study estimated that it will cost \$52.8 million to initiate service on the corridor and \$15.1 million per year for operations.¹¹ The initial capital estimate of \$52 million is based on the cost of acquiring the needed passenger rail vehicles, building the stations, and improving the tracks as necessary to support both passenger and freight operations. As ridership increases over the first ten years of service, an additional \$50 million will be needed to upgrade the tracks in order to double the number of daily trains serving the corridor. The preliminary engineering conducted for "volume one" of the Corridor Transportation Plan will allow the Intrastate Rail Compact to reevaluate these cost estimates and adjust them as needed based on further exploration of the corridor and on conversations with Amtrak, KCS and CN. The Rail Compact should then undertake a thorough analysis of all possible funding mechanisms for the required capital and operating funds for this system. In addition to looking at local, state and federal funding sources, the funding strategy should evaluate the potential for value capture and other innovative finance strategies, as well as the potential for public-private partnerships.

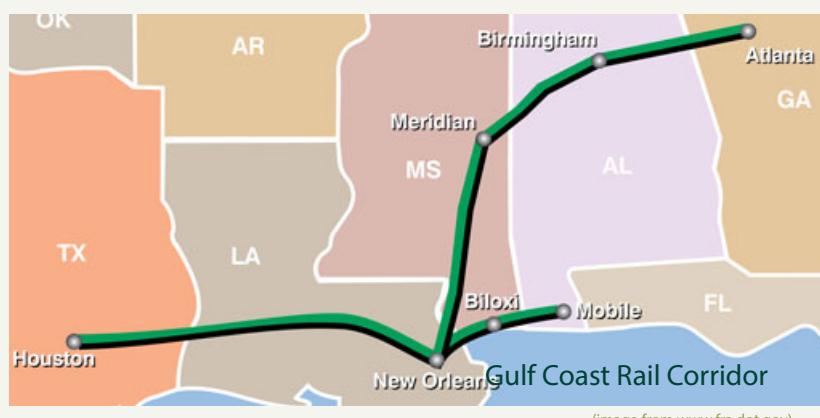
10 Federal Railroad Administration, "Railroad Corridor Transportation Plans, A Guidance Manual," July 8, 2010.

11 Figures in 2008 dollars. 2009 Feasibility Study, Burk-Kleinpeter, Inc.

Spotlight: The Future of the Federal High-Speed and Intercity Rail Program

Since President Obama launched the Federal High-Speed and Intercity Rail Program in 2009, the Administration and Congress have provided \$10.1 billion for U.S. rail projects and plans. Thirty-nine states, the District of Columbia and Amtrak have submitted applications requesting more than \$75 billion in total. Many in the transportation field were disappointed that the high-speed rail program was not funded in the federal budget for the 2011 fiscal year and wondered what this meant for the future of the High-Speed and Intercity Rail Program. The debate over federal transportation policy and the national rail program is currently underway in Washington, but the level of interest expressed by states and the President's strong commitment to the program over the past two years indicate to many that there is a good chance that the federal rail program will live on.

The proposed link between New Orleans and Baton Rouge would be part of the future Gulf Coast High-Speed Rail Corridor. High-speed and commuter trains would both operate on the corridor, similar to the way that high-speed Acela trains and regional commuter trains both operate between Boston and Providence and on other commuter-corridors in the northeast U.S.



(image from www.fra.dot.gov)

3. Form a Regional Commuter Rail Advisory Council

Timeline: Medium-term (1-3 years)

Key Actors: Convened by the Intrastate Rail Compact. Membership could include City and Parish staff, such as directors from the Department of Public Works , Office of Community Development, Redevelopment Authority, Capital Region Planning Commission, New Orleans Regional Planning Commission, Capital Area Transit System, New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, Louisiana Department of Transportation, Chambers of Commerce, Southern High-Speed Rail Commission, representatives from the CONNECT Coalition, leaders from the faith-based community or other public groups, freight rail owners (CN and KCS) and Amtrak

For the purposes of implementing commuter rail and maximizing opportunities to support affordable, walkable transit-oriented development along the corridor, a coordinating body that can continue to think strategically about opportunities to align public, private, and non-profit resources is needed. The Intrastate Rail Compact will serve as the governing body charged with overseeing the implementation of the rail system. The Board of the Intrastate Rail Compact will most likely be comprised of members appointed by the mayors in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, as well as commissioners from any other parishes that elect to join the Compact. While the Rail Compact will have the responsibility and authority to implement commuter rail service, a Regional Commuter Rail Advisory Council could support and advise the Rail Compact, bringing a multidisciplinary perspective to the project. Comprised of select public, private and community leaders, the Regional Commuter Rail Advisory Council would make recommendations to the Rail Compact on issues related to implementing rail service, project financing, land acquisition, community outreach, station-area planning, equity opportunities, and other issues that come up during the implementation of the project. The Advisory Council would be a broad-based sounding board for the leaders on the Rail Compact, providing additional leadership for the project and helping maintain important ties with the business community, housing community, Governor's office, legislature and other groups.

The Regional Commuter Rail Advisory Council could be composed of approximately fifteen members who would be selected by the members of the Rail Compact based on geographic and issue-based diversity. The Advisory Council could hold meetings quarterly or every other month and, while they would have no direct governing authority, they would make recommendations by majority vote to the Rail Compact. Additional activities for the Advisory Council might include:

1. Coordinating a trip to visit and study comparable commuter rail systems
2. Coordinating visits to congressional offices to advance BR/NO rail agenda

3. Supporting the Rail Compact in ongoing dialogue with Louisiana State Department of Transportation and Development, Southern Louisiana High-Speed Rail Commission, freight operators and Amtrak
4. Identifying principles and strategies for optimizing potential for transit-oriented development near stations

What are the roles of the different rail entities?

Entity	Role
Southern High Speed Rail Commission	Facilitate conversation between Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi in order to study the feasibility of rapid rail transit service between the States
Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact (pending)	Implement and oversee operations of commuter rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans
Regional Commuter Rail Advoisry Council (proposed)	Support and advise the Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact, bring multi-disciplinary perspective to the project

To view the legislation enabling the Rail Compact, visit: connect.cpex.org/resources/research

4. Prioritize Investments and Policies that Improve Walkability and Bicycle Access

Timeline: Near term, ongoing

Key Actors: Cities and Parishes, local planning agencies, Capital Region Planning Commission, New Orleans Regional Planning Commission, Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development and possibly state Legislators

Studies have shown that a walkable environment – one with comfortable, safe and inviting sidewalks or pedestrian paths – can support increased transit ridership,¹² higher home values,¹³ improved public health,¹⁴ and better air quality.¹⁴ Walkability is also important to the residents of greater New Orleans and Baton Rouge, 78 percent of whom say it is important to live in walkable neighborhoods.¹⁶ Similarly, bicycling can help link more people to transit and can increase regional mobility without adding to congestion and greenhouse gas emissions. Improving the pedestrian and bicycling environment in greater Baton Rouge and New Orleans could lead to improved local access to jobs and businesses and would lay the foundation for future transit-oriented development. Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure should be near-term investment priorities for the super region. There are already many examples of progress on bicycle and pedestrian issues, including DOTD and RPC's Bicycle Commuter Workshop and the use of \$11 million in federal stimulus funds for bicycle lanes, sidewalks and improved street crossings throughout New Orleans. Potential strategies for the BR/NO super region include:

- Adopting Local Complete Streets Policies: Complete Streets policies mandate the design and management of streets that enable safe access for all users, regardless of age, ability or mode of transportation.¹⁷ An estimated 250 states, regions and localities in the U.S. have adopted Complete Streets policies, with more on the way. In 2010, the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development adopted a Complete Streets policy, stating that the DOTD will plan and fund facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists as part of most non-highway road projects. Since this policy applies only to state routes and federally funded projects, city and parish level policies are needed to ensure that pedestrian and bicycle improvements are made on local streets.
- Expanded State Support for Pedestrian and Bicycle Programs: States can play a critical role by dedicating transportation funds from the Surface Transportation Program (STP), Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program (CMAQ), or other sources for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects or programs. This is an important supplement to Complete Streets policies, enabling stand-alone bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects to be considered in addition to bicycle and pedestrian projects that are part of a needed roadway improvement.

- Maximizing the Use of Regional Transportation Funds to Support Walkability and Bicycle Use: Metropolitan Planning Organizations can work with the state to help determine how some transportation funds are spent in their region. Many MPOs around the country use STP or CMAQ funds to provide grant programs for planning or infrastructure improvements that support walkability, bicycle access and "placemaking."¹⁸ MPOs can help improve walking and biking facilities throughout the community and can also target funds in order to improve pedestrian and bicycle access to transit. For example, in greater Dallas/Fort Worth, the North Central Texas Council of Governments uses local funds to run a competitive grant program that supports projects such as streetscaping, sidewalk improvements, bike paths and other placemaking improvements in places near transit. The Capital Region Planning Commission and the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission could create similar programs and prioritize funding for locations near commuter rail stations or on priority transit corridors. They could also seek funding from existing state-run programs, such as Transportation Enhancements for projects that improve access to transit.



South Carrollton Ave. in New Orleans offers mobility options

(photo by Mathew Rufo, Kids Walk Coalition)

12 Ryan, Sherry and Lawrence Frank, "Pedestrian Environment and Transit Ridership," Journal of Public Transportation, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2009.

13 Cortright, Joe, "Walking the Walk, How Walkability Raises Home Values in U.S. Cities," August 2009.

14 Lawrence Frank, James F. Sallis, et. al. "Many Pathways from Land Use to Health: Associations between Neighborhood Walkability and Active Transportation, Body Mass Index and Air Quality," Journal of the American Planning Association, Volume 72, Issue 1, 2006. 15 (same)

16 Louisiana Realtors Association and Center for Planning Excellence, Poll of Residents in Parishes Intersected by the Proposed BR/NO Commuter Rail Corridor, December 2010.

17 www.completestreets.org

18 For more information on the role that MPOs can play in supporting walkability and other improvements near transit, see "TOD Tools for MPOs" (CTOD, 2010)

5. Develop a Transit-Oriented Development Strategic Plan

Timeline: Medium-term (1-3 years)

Key Actors: Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact in partnership with City and Parish staff, MPOs, public stakeholders, private sector stakeholders (landowners and developers), NO and EBR Redevelopment Authorities, Planning Commissions and Public Works Departments

The 2009 Rail Feasibility Analysis included a preliminary evaluation of issues and opportunities related to station area planning along the Baton Rouge-New Orleans rail corridor. This should serve as the starting point for a more detailed analysis of station-area development opportunities along the commuter rail corridor. To ensure that station area planning is done in a cohesive way that keeps both local and regional goals in mind, station area planning could be coordinated as part of a Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Strategic Plan. A TOD Strategic Plan would analyze the potential for TOD in each station area in the super region, including commuter rail stations, streetcar corridors and other future frequent transit corridors or stations in Baton Rouge or New Orleans.¹⁹ Planning for TOD through a coordinated regional (or in this case super regional) approach is more efficient than creating individual station area planning processes for each site. The TOD Strategic Plan would evaluate local conditions in each station area or transit corridor, identify a phasing strategy for public investments, assessors suggest regional and local policies and programs that support or deter TOD, and recommend a course and schedule for implementation. This recommended plan would help the Rail Compact, MPOs and local jurisdictions identify priority sites for development and prioritize policy changes needed (e.g. zoning, parking policies) to maximize the TOD potential in each place. It would also help prioritize critical pedestrian and bicycle improvements, as previously discussed.



Commuter rail TOD in Lewisville, TX, 25 miles north of Dallas

(photo by Huffines Communities)

Supporting TOD around commuter rail stations like those proposed on the BR-NO corridor, where service frequency will start off with as few as four round trips per day,²⁰ will require a specialized approach compared to traditional TOD near rapid transit stations, where trains arrive every few minutes throughout the day. Specialized considerations for commuter rail TOD include:

- Parking strategies must be very carefully developed so as not to preempt the potential for TOD. While parking is often a necessity at commuter rail stations, large surface parking lots can create a barrier for pedestrians accessing rail stations and can create an unappealing environment for new development. Not every station along the BR/NO corridor may be appropriate for new park-and-ride, especially those locations in existing or planned mixed-use centers.
- Transit alone will not create a development market. While the commuter rail will have the potential to catalyze some development, the opportunities for TOD at each station will build off the existing economic and development context. New development and especially any retail or services will depend upon patronage from the broader community, as rail passengers alone will not be enough to support significant new mixed-use development.
- The potential for commuter rail TOD is strengthened when the commuter station serves as an intermodal hub. For example, because the Union Passenger Terminal station in New Orleans will connect directly to the Loyola line streetcar route, the combined mobility and accessibility provided by the commuter rail and the streetcar system amplify the market for TOD throughout downtown New Orleans. Each jurisdiction along the corridor, but especially Baton Rouge, should keep this in mind when considering and planning future transit service or expansions, and should connect local transit to the future commuter rail stations.

19 In June 2005, the Regional Planning Commission published a "Policy Plan for Transit-Oriented Development" for a proposed Light Rail Transit project that could connect downtown to the New Orleans Louis Armstrong International Airport. If the light rail project advances, this plan should be incorporated into the super regional TOD Strategic Plan. See report at www.norpc.org.

20 Four round-trip trains per day is the service frequency recommended in the 2009 Burk-Kleinpeter, Inc. Feasibility Study. This frequency should be reevaluated as the project advances, especially if station locations or significant access issues in station areas change. For example, the new streetcar connection at New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal could lead to changes in the estimated demand for service.

6. Conduct a Scenario-based Cost Benefit Analysis for Mobility in the NO to BR Corridor

Timeline: Medium-term (1-3 years)

Key Actors: Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact, CONNECT Coalition

The 2009 Feasibility Study for the Baton Rouge-New Orleans Rail Line conducted a Cost Benefit Analysis that measured the benefits of the proposed rail project and calculated a return on investment. The benefits measured in the analysis were:

- Transportation cost savings from improved comfort and reliability, vehicle operating cost savings, and emissions reductions,
- Property development around stations, and
- Savings from the reduction of LA Swift service frequency.²¹

The analysis found that the project would generate an estimated \$186.5 million in benefits over the next 30 years, or about \$6.2 million per year. This figure yields a benefit to cost ratio of 1.4 to 1, meaning that each dollar invested returned \$1.40 in social benefit. The Cost Benefit Analysis predicted a 78 percent chance of the project breaking even, or better.

Despite these favorable findings, the cost of any major infrastructure investment can give elected leaders and the public sticker shock. To help build public support for the project, the Rail Compact should undertake a Cost Benefit Analysis that compares the commuter rail project to various future scenarios for mobility between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, including a “do nothing” alternative and an alternative that involves expanding the highway network. The analysis should measure a broad set of benefits for the alternatives, including implications for regional economic productivity, employment growth, equity, the natural environment, health and safety. This would give regional decision-makers a more complete view of the implications of their plans and investments.

21. 2009 Feasibility Study, Burk-Kleinpeter, Inc.

22 (same)



Is road build out worth the costs? (photo courtesy of CPEX)

The 2009 Feasibility Study took the first steps toward this broader analysis. For example, the study found that, due to anticipated increases in congestion, the average travel speed for cars on the I-10 corridor in 2030 would be 26 miles per hour, down from 58 miles per hour in 2009. The scenario-based analysis recommended here would evaluate the impact of this change on regional productivity and economic growth. The 2009 Study also compared the cost of the 78-mile rail project to three highway widening projects that cover a total of 9.4 miles of 2-lane highway. The estimated capital cost for these three highway projects alone was 250 % more than the capital cost of building the rail line, and the return on investment for these projects in comparison to the rail investment is unknown.

To view the complete Feasibility Study, visit:
connect.cpex.org/resources/research

Capital Cost Comparison of Commuter Rail vs. Recent/Current Highway Projects²²

Projects	I-10 Widening	I-10 Widening	I-12 Widening	BR - NO Commuter Rail
Location	Metairie Causeway – 17th Street Canal	Baton Rouge 10/12 Split – Siegen Lane	Baton Rouge O’Neal – Pete’s Highway	Baton Rouge to New Orleans
Length / Lanes	1.9 miles / 2	3.7 miles / 2	3.8 miles / 2	78 miles / ---
Capital Cost	\$69 million	\$86 million	\$100 million	\$105 million

* \$105 million capital cost estimate includes initial expenses plus additional upgrade costs needed to achieve 16 trains/day by 2023

Conclusion

National interest in transit and walkable communities has grown exponentially over the last decade, with the dawning awareness that the era of cheap, plentiful energy is drawing to a close. Consumers have been jolted by volatile gas prices and the severity of the foreclosure crisis, both of which hit hardest in suburban communities where commutes are long and expensive.

These challenges have been acute in greater New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Each year, the people and businesses of the super region collectively waste almost \$900 million due to congestion.²³ Only an average of 50 percent of households in greater Baton Rouge and New Orleans live near a bus or rail transit stop, compared to a national average of 65 percent of households.²⁴ Where transit does exist, it faces catastrophic funding challenges. The need for improved access and mobility will continue to increase due to the fact that in 2025, roughly one in five people in the BR/NO super region will be 65 years or older.²⁵ These older residents, and all of the super region's residents, will need reliable, safe and low-stress ways to travel through the region - especially during times of evacuation.

A quality transit network can help provide people and businesses with the access they need to stay connected, save money and move freely through the region. Around the U.S., however, cities like Cleveland, Houston, Dallas/Fort-Worth and Atlanta are proving that investments in transit are about more than moving people from place to place. Transit is increasingly understood as a fundamental way to support concentrated economic development and job growth, and to attract the next generation of young, talented thinkers and companies.

The areas of investment discussed in these briefs - improved local and regional transit, a new commuter rail line connecting Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and increased support for affordable, walkable transit-oriented communities – could set the region on course to not only address the challenges outlined above, but to strengthen the region's communities and economy. The proposed commuter rail line, for example, is forecast to reduce auto traffic in the I-10 corridor by 4,800 vehicles per day, or 89 million vehicle miles annually by 2038.²⁶ During roughly the same time period, demand for households located near transit in greater New Orleans is expected to double to more than 60,000 households.²⁷ The entire super region has a significant opportunity to seize the moment by investing in high-quality, accessible communities where people have a range of transportation choices.

One of southern Louisiana's greatest assets is the communities' ability to come together around issues that matter and work hard to bring about change. These briefs present a call to action and lay out a series of next steps that will set the stage for long-term economic prosperity and competitiveness. The time has never been better to craft an innovative plan for how the New Orleans and Baton Rouge super region can generate lasting value for its neighborhoods, businesses and residents, and rise up as a national leader in the race toward sustainable regional development.

23 Texas Transportation Institute, 2010 Urban Mobility Report.

24 (study includes 100 largest US Metros) Tomer, Adie et. al. "Missed Opportunity: Transit and Jobs in Metropolitan America," Brookings Institution, 2011.

25 U.S. Census Bureau 1970-1979 Intercensal County Estimates by Age, Sex, Race; 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates; Louisiana State Census Data Center Population Projections

26 2009 Feasibility Study, Burk-Kleinpeter, Inc.

27 Center for Transit-Oriented Development, Hidden in Plain Sight: Capturing the Demand for Housing Near Transit, 2004. Estimates not available for Baton Rouge.

Join the CONNECT Coalition

CONNECT is a coalition that works across the New Orleans and Baton Rouge regions to advocate for expanded mobility choices that offer improved access to affordable homes, job centers and equitable economic opportunity. The CONNECT Coalition is actively working to convene the community around the issues discussed in this brief.

To get involved or for more information, contact CONNECT at connect@cpex.org.





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