



*Statewide Transportation Plan Update*

# POSITION PAPER

November 26, 2012

# CONNECT Coalition

CONNECT is a coalition of public and private organizations championing the vision of a sustainable super region between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, where multiple modes of transportation will efficiently, equitably and affordably connect residents to jobs and affordable housing in a manner which builds household wealth, local economies, environmental conservation and strong communities. By bringing together a diverse coalition of nearly 500 representatives from public and private entities, CONNECT seeks to break down the organizational silos which have often planned, invested and practiced in isolation from one another. As gas prices remain volatile and federal attention and funding recognizes the value of alternative transportation modes, CONNECT members are on the forefront of a paradigm shift in how citizens and policy makers in consider transportation planning and investments. CONNECT strongly supports more equitable, financially responsible, and sustainable models of investing and decision making in transportation to secure a more competitive and thriving future for Louisiana communities.

## CONNECT Coalition Steering Committee

Baton Rouge Advocates for Safe Streets

Transport for NOLA

Providence Community Housing

Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations

Greater New Orleans Community Data Center

Baton Rouge Area Chamber

AARP

Baton Rouge Area Foundation

Greater New Orleans Foundation

Louisiana Housing Alliance

Foundation for Louisiana

PICO/WIN/MICAH Project

Greater New Orleans Urban League

Norman Francis, Xavier University

Raymond Jetson, Star Hill Church

Center for Community Progress

New Orleans Neighborhood Partnership Network

University of New Orleans

# CONNECT Policy Focus

Since 2011, the CONNECT Coalition has solidified its mission of working across the Baton Rouge and New Orleans super region to advocate for expanded mobility choices that offer improved access to affordable homes, job centers and equitable economic opportunity. The Coalition has created and advanced a policy platform working on the statewide, regional and local scales and defined a common agenda among a diverse group of advocates and stakeholders. CONNECT has developed successful collaborative efforts among advocates from the Baton Rouge and New Orleans regions while focusing on accomplishing large-scale, long-term change.

One of our top four policy priorities is to ensure that the passenger rail project is incorporated in the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) Statewide Transportation Plan update. Throughout 2012 and 2013, DOTD will be undertaking this plan update working with a team of consultants, conducting research and receiving input from stakeholders.

## *CONNECT's 2012 Policy Priorities*

- 1. Ensure a strong transit and rail component is incorporated in the state's Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) transportation plan update**
2. Adopt Complete Streets policies on the regional and municipal levels
3. Advance passenger rail project
4. Support metro transit systems

# The Statewide Transportation Plan Update

Approximately every ten years DOTD updates Louisiana's comprehensive master plan for transportation across the state. Because the Statewide Transportation Plan addresses the movement of goods and people along state-owned roadways and rail lines which run through hundreds of communities, the plan will have a direct impact on citizens across the state and establish the framework for future investments in the decades to come. The plan will encompass a vision, goals and objectives and forecasting for the next 30 years with economic growth opportunities as the major focus. As stated by DOTD, the policies, programs, and projects in the Louisiana Statewide Transportation Plan are intended to support wealth-building industries and employment that we already have; strengthen our foundation for economic growth; take advantage of opportunities in international trade; enhance the quality of life for Louisiana citizens; and affirm the message that our state is progressive.

Included in the Statewide Transportation Plan is the Statewide Rail Plan, which prioritizes the needs of freight and passenger rail across the state. The last state rail plan was completed in 2003 and was the first Rail Plan ever conducted by Louisiana DOTD. The goals of the state rail plan are to state the policy for freight operations, establish priorities to enhance rail service, and serve as the basis for federal and state rail investments. Under the recently reauthorized federal transportation bill, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), all state rail plans must be approved by USDOT if the state wishes to apply for any federal grants to fund rail projects.

The update of the Statewide Transportation Plan and Rail Plan present an opportunity to rebalance our transportation investments by including multiple modes of transport, create greater opportunities for economic growth, and better integrate transportation investments between the growth centers of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The update for the Statewide Transportation Plan takes place in an entirely different context from when the current plan was developed a decade ago. Perhaps the most significant result of the 2005 storms was the development of the Louisiana Speaks Regional Plan, spearheaded by the Louisiana Recovery Authority and released in 2007. Louisiana Speaks is the historic result of more than 27,000 residents providing their input, concerns, and visions for their state. The unprecedented involvement of so many citizens in the post-storm planning process indicates the interest Louisiana citizens have in helping to shape how communities grow and better connect with one another. During this upcoming update, we commend DOTD for committing to an open, transparent process that will not only reflect the input and aspirations of the people of Louisiana, but also national best practices in transportation planning.

# Impact on the Super Region

The updated Statewide Transportation Plan should reflect the growing importance of the super region, which is defined by CONNECT to include the Parishes of Ascension, East Baton Rouge, Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Charles, St. John, St. James and nearby parishes. As Baton Rouge and New Orleans continue to grow, the boundaries between them continue to blur. Overlapping commuting patterns, interwoven cultures, and a shared ecology mean that transportation investments and planning must be coordinated in a way that recognizes the interdependence of the state's two largest metro areas and the powerful economic engines they are—representing roughly half the state's population, jobs and gross domestic product.

In addition to the pressing need of uplifting this economic driver, revisions to the Statewide Transportation Plan are occurring at a time when citizens across the state have expressed strong support for a more balanced approach to transportation investments. Evidence of this sentiment emerged during the Louisiana Speaks process, when citizen participants identified the value of creating stronger connections between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. More recently, a scientific opinion survey commissioned by Center for Planning Excellence revealed that 75 percent of residents along a proposed Baton Rouge/New Orleans rail corridor favored the concept of linking the two metro areas by inter-city rail. Expanded transit options were also identified as priorities during the recent local comprehensive planning in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. As more and more U.S. regions race to build high-quality transit networks, it is clear that places like Baton Rouge and New Orleans need to reinforce and expand their transit networks in order to stay nationally and internationally competitive.

## **The New Orleans-Baton Rouge Super Region Currently Holds**

45%

of the state's population

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48%

of the state's jobs

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**and produces**

53%

of the state's  
Gross Domestic Product

Since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, state and local governments have had the opportunity to plan anew for future economic growth, and new regional partnerships have emerged as neighboring jurisdictions realize the benefits of working together. The development of new comprehensive plans have been underway in many of the parishes across the super region, including New Orleans, East Baton Rouge, St. Charles, St. Bernard, St. James, St. John, Ascension, St. Tammany and Tangipahoa. New priorities have emerged in the planning processes that reflect smartly planned and phased investment in land-use and transportation.

Over  
**50,000**  
people commute between  
Baton Rouge and New Orleans  
on a daily basis

*According to a study by the  
Greater New Orleans Community Data Center*

One of the priorities of the Louisiana Speaks planning effort was the need for an inter-city commuter rail link between the Baton Rouge and New Orleans metro areas. By connecting the two largest metro areas in the state, a new rail line would allow the state's largest job centers to function as a single economic unit. More than 88 percent of the ridership on the proposed route is expected to come from work-related trips.

Improving the flow of people and ideas along the corridor would give companies access to a larger labor pool, give employees more choices in where to live, and make the region more attractive for business expansion. The Greater New Orleans Data Center recently released data on commuting patterns between the two metros finding that over 50,000 people commute between the two cities on a daily basis. With limited options for significantly increasing road capacity between the Baton Rouge and New Orleans Metro areas, DOTD must plan for alternate modes of moving people and goods across the state's fastest growing region.

In addition to providing new economic growth in the super region, the inter-city connection by rail will provide a critical additional evacuation route. The resiliency of both Baton Rouge and New Orleans is dependent upon improving and diversifying the regions' evacuation routes. Both the Baton Rouge and New Orleans metro areas have lower car ownership rates compared to the national average, a fact that makes them prime candidates for expanded regional transit networks but also leaves a vast population of residents vulnerable during a natural disaster. The need for improved access and mobility will only increase due to the fact that by 2025, roughly one in five people in the Baton Rouge/New Orleans super region will be 65 years or older. 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.

However, to make such a large-scale, alternative transportation investment work, there must be an inclusive, equitable and safe network of transit, sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes within each community, connecting neighborhoods to commercial center and workplaces. While such connectivity will be beneficial and necessary for evacuation, it is also crucial for daily prosperity and quality of life of all residents.

Consistent with the recommendation in DOTD's 2008 Plan Review and Status Report, CONNECT strongly advocates for the inclusion of rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans in the revised Statewide Transportation Plan.

The revised plan should contain language that provides the state with the maximum flexibility to compete and qualify for any future federal funding that would support inter-city rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Ultimately, governmental units within the Super Region may take the lead on developing and funding a rail system between Baton Rouge and New Orleans through the provisions of the Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact. However, we strongly support inclusion of inter-city rail in the updated plan to ensure the state does not close off potential funding and financing opportunities that may arise in the future.

## *What is the Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact?*

Act #858, passed in the 2010 Legislative session, authorizes the creation of a Louisiana Intrastate Rail Compact with the goals of developing and improving an efficient, safe and well-maintained system of rail and other transit ways. The Act creates the mechanism whereby two or more parishes or municipalities can form a quasi-governmental entity that could identify and generate alternative sources of revenue for financing improvements to the state's transportation system.

The Compact has the authority to construct and operate transit-way facilities along a transit corridor with prior consent of governing bodies within the bounds of the Compact. Feasibility studies must be conducted to substantiate project need and justification. The Compact can contract with other entities for related projects, can levy fees for operations or debt service, can acquire property and easements, can exercise eminent domain in accordance with state law, can borrow funds and issue bonds, and can seek loans and grants to carry out its work.

East Baton Rouge and Orleans Parishes have appointed members to the Compact and CONNECT is working with the parishes along the proposed rail corridor to seat additional representatives. To read more about the Compact and current appointments, visit [connect.cpex.org](http://connect.cpex.org)

# Priorities for Statewide Transportation Plan Update

The update of the Statewide Transportation Plan is an opportunity for Louisiana to secure a competitive future and support strong local communities through strategic transportation investments and improved coordination between cities, parishes and the private sector on issues of transportation, housing, growth, and economic development. There are many benefits related to strategic transportation investments and coordinated planning, including the potential to reduce regional congestion, lower greenhouse gas emissions, improved regional equity, increased access to affordable housing, increased walking and improved public health. CONNECT calls on DOTD to consider these guiding principles as the agency begins its work of updating the Statewide Transportation Plan:

## ***Inclusion of the Baton Rouge-New Orleans Passenger Rail Line in the State Rail Plan***

As this State Rail Plan includes all freight and passenger rail priorities for the next decade, the proposed inter-city line linking Baton Rouge and New Orleans must be included as a priority of the plan: it is critical to our long-term economic vitality and equity as a region and could function as an additional evacuation route. The Rail Plan should ensure that the Baton Rouge-New Orleans rail project meets guidelines for the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA), so that the project can be eligible for future PRIIA funding.

## ***Preserve Existing Transportation Assets***

The Statewide Transportation Plan should focus on investments that improve and protect Louisiana's economic competitiveness. The revised plan should address infrastructure improvements by taking better care of what we have already built and by prioritizing the preservation of existing transportation assets over expanded capacity. Louisiana should employ a fix-it-first approach to future transportation investments. Preventive maintenance and repair of existing roads should be the highest priority for spending and should account for significantly more spending than expanded capacity. This approach reduces maintenance costs later, supports business and residential investment in areas already served by transportation infrastructure, and creates jobs.

To address the movement of people and goods holistically, the plan should focus on the continued maintenance of our current system, preserving funding and enhancing programs that relieve congestion, and offer transportation alternatives to single-car travel on our interstates. To that end, La Swift—the bus line between Baton Rouge and New Orleans—should be featured in the plan as a program to continue building, as it transports over 10,000 people per month between the state's leading metro areas; resulting in over 10,000 fewer vehicles wearing down the roadway on a monthly basis.

# 75%

of residents in the super region  
support passenger rail linking  
Baton Rouge and New Orleans

*According to a 2010 poll by the  
CONNECT Coalition*

## **Support Walkability and Bicycle Infrastructure**

In 2010, DOTD 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. The revised state plan should identify, prioritize and fund implementation of Complete Street projects.

# 78%

of residents in the super region  
say living in neighborhoods with  
sidewalks linking them to neighbors  
and amenities is important

*According to a 2010 poll by the  
CONNECT Coalition*

Improving the pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure can lead to improved local access to jobs and businesses and can lay the foundation for future transit-oriented development. Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure should be included in the revised state plan. While in past years federal programs such as Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements, and Recreational Trails have provided funding for bike and pedestrian improvements in communities, the recently reauthorized federal transportation bill, MAP-21, has reduced funding for these programs by a third and consolidated each into the Transportation Alternatives (TA) funding pool.

Not only are communities now in greater competition to access these limited funds, but federal provisions allow state DOT's to redistribute up to 50 percent of TA money to other transportation projects, regardless of their inclusion of alternative mobility provisions. It is critical that this Statewide Plan Transportation Plan update emphasizes the need for greater biking and walking infrastructure and CONNECT strongly urges that TA funds be used for these purposes.

## **Reward and Support Smart Local Land Use Planning**

The revised state plan should support land use patterns that create vibrant places with transportation choices for the citizens of Louisiana. Our state needs a more efficient system that rewards communities for developing in smarter, more sustainable ways, reducing energy use and carbon emissions while ensuring the availability of housing affordable housing near job centers and public transit. As DOTD Deputy Secretary Eric Kalivoda stated at the 2011 and 2012 CONNECT Policy Forums, it is up to the local communities to create a vision and comprehensive land-use plan to guide future growth while the state's role is to provide assistance and advice.

## ***Coordinate transportation investments across state agencies***

Transportation, housing, and economic development can no longer be viewed as completely separate spheres with little or no coordination throughout the different levels of government. DOTD should develop and implement the Statewide Transportation Plan in a coordinated framework that includes partnerships with the Louisiana Housing Corporation, the LHC Housing and Transportation Commission, and Louisiana Economic Development. Coordinated planning across state agencies will ensure that the investment of public dollars are fully leveraged, and that future transportation spending promotes the development of affordable housing and contributes to economic growth.

## *What is the Louisiana Housing Corporation?*

The Mission of the Louisiana Housing Corporation (LHC) is to assure that every Louisiana resident is granted an opportunity to obtain safe, affordable, energy efficient housing. Each day this ongoing challenge is met by a dedicated staff of professionals who allocate federal and state funds to help low-to-moderate income citizens make their housing dreams a reality.

The Housing and Transportation Planning and Coordinating Commission was established within the LHC in 2011 by state statute (SB 269). The Commission was tasked with the coordination and integration of planning and spending on housing and transportation needs by municipal and parish governments, public authorities, and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development. The Commission was established to provide recommendations to the Client on how the need for multiple modes of transportation and housing types can be coordinated to better serve Louisiana citizens and businesses. The Commission was also specifically designated to monitor comprehensive housing needs and to make recommendations on leveraging various government investments.

# Conclusion

CONNECT is promoting a new transportation vision for Louisiana and the super region that provides high quality transit options to foster economic growth, enhance existing communities, and provide citizens with wealth-building opportunities. The Statewide Transportation Plan update provides a unique opportunity to rebalance our priorities and enact policies to ensure that investments are more efficient, more sustainable, and create an environment that will enable Louisiana to compete and secure a stronger future. As DOTD establishes clear, measurable transportation goals and objectives, we recognize that the resources for many investments may not currently be available. However, a balanced and forward-looking plan that reflects the necessity of multiple modes of transit – including rail – is the foundation of a more connected, thriving Louisiana that can provide a better quality of life for all our citizens in the decades to come.