

Slip-Sliding Away?

The Challenge of Implementing St. Tammany's Vision for Growth Management

St. Tammany Parish has spent decades engaged in the business of poorly guided development. The results: willy-nilly growth patterns, environmental degradation, traffic congestion, and a declining quality of life.

Concerned with the consequences of inadequately controlled growth, the Parish is currently engaged in the New Directions 2025 comprehensive planning process. The process began with a vision to bring growth under control and preserve quality of life. But as time passes, that vision continues to disintegrate before citizens' very eyes.

In this report, BGR examines St. Tammany's vision for the future and the obstacles to bringing that vision to fruition. It discusses options for removing those obstacles and radically redefining the way growth occurs.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

St. Tammany provides the classic case of a suburb falling victim to its own success. It has experienced rapid growth in part because of the natural beauty and quality of life it offers — but those very attributes are eroding as a result of rapid growth. It has become a cliché on the north shore that each new arrival wants to close the door behind him. Meanwhile, long-term residents can only watch with chagrin as developers build fences

across hunting grounds, subdivide old farms, and install strip retail outlets where once stood piney havens.

Between 1940 and 1980, St. Tammany grew from a population of 23,624 to 110,869. By 2000, St. Tammany, with a population of 191,268, had become one of the five most populous parishes in the state. Orleans and Jefferson remained first and second.

The dramatic population increase has been accompanied by poorly controlled growth. Much of St. Tammany's dilemma can be summed up in terms of that late 20th century American affliction: suburban sprawl. Most broadly, the word "sprawl" connotes an inefficient, unplanned, fragmented, environmentally unsound approach to land use in which land development, commercial or residential, far outpaces population growth. It encompasses several common suburban attributes:

- The separation of housing from retail such that one is not within walking distance of the other.
- A pattern of land use designed to accommodate the automobile, to the exclusion of pedestrian traffic.

- A pattern of development arranged and deconcentrated in a way that makes public transit impossible.
- The unplanned fragmentation of rural areas into disjointed swaths of development.
- A pattern of development that virtually forbids residents to live and work in the same community.

The simplest way to measure sprawl is by looking at the ratio of population increase to land development. Between 1980 and 2000, St. Tammany was the fastest growing parish in the state, with a 73% increase in population. During roughly that same time period (1982-2000), according to the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, the amount of developed land in the Parish increased by more than 218%.

For St. Tammany, the end results of sprawl include: an environment degraded by bulldozers, automobile exhaust pipes, and inadequately treated sewage; mounting traffic problems and increasing dependence on the automobile because of poor planning and rapid growth; and an "Anywhere, U.S.A.," commercial landscape lined with the usual big-box retailers, fast food outlets, and chain drug stores, and their accompanying drive-throughs and wide swaths of blacktop. In short, the combination of small-

Parish Population Trends, 1940-2000

Parish	1980	1990	2000	Change 1980-00
Orleans	557,927	496,938	484,674	-13% (-73,253)
Jefferson	454,592	448,306	455,466	+0.2% (874)
St. Tammany	110,869	144,508	191,268	+73% (80,339)

town charm and pastoral beauty that once characterized St. Tammany Parish is being eaten alive.

In a 1997 survey of St. Tammany voters on their feelings about growth and development, researchers from the University of New Orleans found anti-growth sentiment had doubled in the five years since an earlier survey. The 1997 survey revealed that a large plurality of residents (39%) considered growth to be the Parish's biggest problem. (Crime was a distant second, at 11%.) A more general survey in 1999 showed similar and in some areas growing concerns, with 38% predicting the Parish would be overcrowded by 2009 and 30% saying the Parish is "turning into the south shore." The opinion surveys and the comments of citizen participants in the Parish's New Directions 2025 comprehensive planning effort show a repeated concern with not "turning into the south shore," particularly Jefferson Parish.

Life in St. Tammany

A 1997 survey of 500 registered voters in St. Tammany Parish showed profound concern about development and quality of life.

86% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that building in fragile natural areas, such as flood plains, marshes or wetlands, should be prohibited.

76% said commercial and residential growth should be limited or stopped completely.

75% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that "It is important to control land development even if that places restrictions on what people can build on their property"; 73% agreed "even if it means new houses will cost more"; 68% agreed "even if it results in fewer jobs in your community."

55% said the quality of the natural environment had "gotten worse" over the last few years.

54% said they oppose new residential growth in their community.

54% said they oppose new commercial development.

54% said it is important to control development even if it means paying higher taxes or fees.

Source: St. Tammany Growth and Development Survey, University of New Orleans Survey Research Center, 1997.

To make matters worse, the infrastructure in St. Tammany is inadequate and poorly arranged. Too few highways must conduct too much traffic from too many subdivisions and strip malls. The lack of an integrated street grid (or any serious attempt at one) in most places in unincorporated St. Tammany means that there are too few secondary streets to relieve traffic flow. Meanwhile, rapid growth and an ungovernable array of private septic and sewer systems are burdening the environment. According to the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation, the waterways of the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain are often unfit for swimming due to high fecal coliform counts.

A VISION FOR CHANGE

By the end of the 1990s, the development trends in St. Tammany had set off alarms in the Parish. Responding to concerns, the St. Tammany Parish Police Jury in 1998 launched a comprehensive planning process known as New Directions 2025. The comprehensive plan was to contain 10 elements including: Vision, Community Facilities, Critical and Sensitive Areas, Economic Development, Essential Community Design, Housing, Land Use, Natural Hazards, Transportation, and Implementation.

The Vision Element was completed in 1999 and approved that same year by the New Directions 2025 Steering Committee, the St. Tammany Parish Planning Commission, and the Police Jury. The Vision Element begins by acknowledging the fact that St. Tammany is "facing tremendous

Headed in the Right Direction?

New Directions 2025 elements and their progress

Element	Initial Target Completion	Status
Vision	1999	Complete
Land Use	2000	Awaiting Parish Council approval
Transportation	2000	Complete; approved by resolution
Community Facilities	2001	In progress
Housing	2001	In progress
Economic Development	2002	Awaiting Planning Commission approval
Critical/Sensitive Areas	2002	In progress
Natural Hazards	2003	In progress
Community Design	2003	Recommendations integrated into zoning code
Implementation	Ongoing	Ongoing

Source: St. Tammany Parish President's Office

growth and development pressures" that are "beginning to endanger the quality of life that has made St. Tammany Parish such an attractive and desirable place to call home." It recognizes the need for planned and sustainable growth. It continues: "All parties involved realized that what they most treasure about St. Tammany – the lush pine forests, the quaint small-town character, the flora and fauna of the wetlands, the clean air and water – is in danger of being ruined by unplanned growth."

The Vision Element emerged from more than 50 meetings attended by about 1,800 participants. Its assertions reveal a collective desire to preserve those things participants most treasure, while making radical changes in the current pattern of development.

It states a desire to protect waterways for recreational uses. It calls for land use practices that provide for conservation of plant and animal habitats, as well as farmlands, woodlands, wetlands, "urban forests," scenic corridors, and other green spaces. It seeks policies that will minimize noise, light, and air pollution.

On the economic development front, it envisions an environmentally sensitive approach that is "inclusive" and

Vision 2025 Vision Statement

"As a progressive and prosperous community, St. Tammany Parish respects and safeguards a desirable and sustainable quality of life and will continue to do so for this and future generations. In doing so, our parish will afford all residents the opportunity to live, learn, work, play, and retire in a vibrant and cohesive community that respects and balances our natural resources and environment with our human potential and needs. Our vision is grounded in the values we have established to guide our actions in furtherance of each element of our comprehensive plan, New Directions 2025."

Adopted by the St. Tammany Police Jury, 1999

"dynamic." It recommends policies to encourage reuse of abandoned commercial and industrial sites.

The Vision Element of New Directions 2025 goes on to argue for "design standards that support social interaction, cultural identity, aesthetics, and respect for human scale, history and the natural environment." It encourages "walking communities and biking paths" and a public transportation network that links centers of activity. It calls for a transportation system, integrated with land use, that is efficient, accessible, and well-planned, effectively linking "high volume centers" as well as neighboring jurisdictions.

In addition, the Vision Element calls for the Parish to "promote affordable living without compromising quality by encouraging concentrated residential development. This development will maintain neighborhood character and environment and create connectivity. This development will be planned with respect to existing infrastructure and zoning." It seeks to encourage homeownership for "all income levels" but acknowledges a need for rental units and other forms of affordable housing so that the work force of St. Tammany Parish can live in the Parish.

As for land use in general, the Vision Element declares, "We will conserve and respect the natural splendor of our environment while we plan for eco-

nomic opportunity; preserve our cultural identities, historic towns, countryside and scenic corridors; create livable communities; and enhance our quality of life with the support and enforcement of responsive, cooperative governments."

Taken as a whole, the Vision Element describes a Parish with discrete urban spaces and protected rural spaces. It describes a pattern of development that is efficient, environmentally sound, open to people of different income levels, and provides for a diverse range of economic opportunities. In short, it calls for a traditional town and country pattern, backed by governmental enforcement of a strong planning program and cooperation between the Parish and its municipalities. It calls for a St. Tammany Parish that in some ways doesn't exist, and in some ways is being destroyed by the current pattern of growth.

BLURRING THE VISION

St. Tammany faces serious challenges in achieving the objectives set forth in the 1999 Vision Element. The goals embraced in the Vision Element are incompatible with, and will require radical changes in, the Parish's current development patterns. Some of these incompatibilities are discussed below.

Fragmentation of Infrastructure

The well-planned transportation network and environmentally sound approach endorsed in the Vision Element are at odds with the current pattern of residential and commercial development in St. Tammany. Currently, residential development is characterized by isolated subdivisions with limited entrances sometimes leading to a series of branch cul-de-sacs or streets that abruptly end. Such communities are by definition cut off from the rest of the Parish, except for the one or

two outlets on a feeder highway. This contrasts with a traditional urban neighborhood, which is placed on a grid system of streets, including thoroughfares. These connect to adjoining streets, allowing for traffic relief. A primary result of St. Tammany's developmental pattern is automobile congestion.

Along retail corridors, a similar lack of infrastructure connection can be found. Parking lots that front retail outlets standing side by side are separated at property lines, forcing traffic back onto feeder highways and adding to congestion. Alternative routes to commercial activity are few and far between, as strip development rarely offers back roads.

As commercial and residential activity increases in a disconnected pattern of development along a few multi-lane arteries, traffic naturally increases. If each new subdivision sends dozens of new drivers onto the same artery everyone else uses every morning, clogging is inevitable. The bad news is that planners have found that the problem cannot be solved simply by adding more lanes. While additional lanes might provide temporary relief, the increased capacity eventually leads to more development in the same corridor and more traffic woes.

Traffic problems are exacerbated by the fact that the retail strips, subdivisions, and highways generally lack sidewalks, bike paths, or even buffers separating pedestrians from traffic. This limits pedestrian activity and forces residents to make more trips by car. Where a critical mass of activity is found, pedestrian alternatives can ease traffic and provide quality of life improvements.

Meanwhile, underground, the existing patchwork of sewer systems in St. Tammany presents tremendous challenges. Unlike the major cities of St. Tammany, the Parish does not provide development with connections to a central sewer system. Consequently, new subdivisions install privately run pack-



age treatment systems. Parish officials estimate that there are as many as 35,000 on-site systems, and more than 400 (Department of Environmental Quality-approved) commercial treatment facilities, which could serve one site or a whole subdivision. The difficulty in regulating a fragmented and frequently inadequate approach to sewage treatment has led to the shame of St. Tammany: once-pristine waterways that are now unsuitable for swimming.

A Burdensome Minimum Lot Size

St. Tammany Parish requires a large minimum lot size of 90 by 140 feet, or a quarter of an acre, for standard new subdivisions. Smaller lots can be used in planned unit developments. While on the surface a minimum lot size requirement seems to conserve green space by slowing down development or leaving more trees intact, it is ultimately a counterproductive tool for doing so. Large minimum lot sizes tend to have several consequences that are at odds with St. Tammany's vision: They lead to development of rural lands at a rapid rate; they are inefficient, requiring longer lengths of infrastructure to accommodate fewer dwellings; and they reduce the viability of public transit by diffusing population.

Strip Development

Another development pattern that works contrary to the vision is excessive strip commercial development along highways. Such development is one of the factors destroying the natural splendor of the environment and scenic corridors.

Strip commercial is characterized by high-volume, traffic-generating uses, deep building setbacks, separate vehicular entrances and exits for each commercial outlet, a pedestrian-hostile environment, and a cluttered appear-

ance caused by an abundance of signage. It is designed to favor automobile shopping alone, although it inevitably fails to accommodate automobiles adequately as traffic mounts. In St. Tammany, once verdant highways have been reduced to traffic-jammed carpets of asphalt.

PLANNING FOR A GROWING PARISH

In order to achieve its vision, St. Tammany will have to transform radically its approach to land use and embrace planning principles that run contrary to current practices. Ideally, such a transformation would occur in the context of city-parish cooperation. This transformed approach would include:

- Restricting development to sites adjacent to existing residential and commercial areas.
- Encouraging or requiring more concentrated development.
- Arresting the development of limited-access communities, replacing them with development based either on an integrated grid or another highly connected pattern that incorporates new thoroughfares (taking into account natural features and other obstacles).
- Consolidating or regionalizing sewage treatment.

The New Directions 2025 Land Use Plan, completed this year and approved by the Parish Planning Commission, recognizes many of the issues discussed above. It includes the following assertions:

- The Parish should encourage greater connectivity in its transportation network.
- The Parish should limit commercial and institutional uses to concentrated areas, rather than allow-

ing them along the entire length of major highways.

- The Parish should discourage spot commercial zoning in otherwise residential or rural areas and encourage mixed-use development, based on detailed planning and performance standards, in existing towns, villages or hamlets or in designated planned mixed-use centers.
- The Parish should closely monitor and strongly regulate septic and sewage treatment systems.
- The Parish should pursue reforestation, the creation of parks and preserves, the expansion of productive agriculture, and the conservation of natural flood plains and wetlands.
- The Parish should create new options for denser development, including Planned Districts that follow traditional town patterns as seen in central Covington and Mandeville. Through a designation called "Planned Residential / Conservation," the Parish should allow denser individual home sites if a large percentage of the total tract is left in agricultural or storm water uses or is otherwise undeveloped, in perpetuity.
- The Parish and municipalities should engage in cooperative long-term relationships that protect the interests of all jurisdictions.

Although the Land Use Plan represents a step in the right direction, it alone is insufficient to bring about the needed changes. Reversing current trends and achieving the goals set forth in the Vision Element will require the creation of an aggressive and mandatory program for managing growth. Such a program would have several elements, including the following.



Ensuring Force of Law in the Master Plan

Whether the New Directions 2025 master plan should have the force of law – that is, whether the Parish should be required by law to abide by its own master plan – is a matter of some debate. On one side, some planners argue that master plans do not lend themselves to holding the force of law because they are too general and broad in scope; others argue that master plans, and particularly land use plans, should be adopted by ordinance to ensure that the jurisdiction abides by them, as well as to justify the effort and expense that went into them.

Ultimately, the answer may depend on the community in question. In the case of St. Tammany, there are a number of reasons to give the master plan the force of law. First, the drastic change in development practices that is necessary to achieve the vision will not occur without an institutional framework that requires it. Second, ensuring that the master plan has the force of law would help to keep the Parish focused on its vision. Third, it would help to offset a perceived bias in favor of development interests. Critics charge that some members of the Planning and Zoning Commissions are controlled by the Parish Council and developers; that many Parish Council members are in cahoots with developers; that elected officials, particularly council members, either don't understand or aren't truly invested in New Directions 2025; and that council members want the discre-

Note on Sources

In conducting research for this report, BGR consulted a wide range of sources, including legal documents, official proposals, and scholarly literature. Interview subjects included planners, academics, legal experts, developers, residents, and officials from the Parish President's Office, Planning Department, and Parish Council.

tion to handle zoning on a case-by-case basis. Council members do not agree with this assessment.

The St. Tammany charter requires the Parish to “prepare, enact, enforce and maintain comprehensive plans for the development of the Parish.” While the reference to enforcement suggests an intent to make the plan binding, the language is less than clear on the extent to which the comprehensive plan binds the Parish, its administrative subdivisions or its various boards and commissions.

St. Tammany has a number of options available to ensure that the master plan is unambiguously given the force of law. The first would be a change in the language of the charter, specifically requiring that ordinances and other government decisions conform to the master plan. The second would be the adoption of the master plan in its entirety by ordinance, making the master plan itself a law. The third approach would be the inclusion of language in the comprehensive zoning ordinance requiring that it conform to the master plan.

The Land Use Plan itself contemplates the second approach. It states: “The 2025 Land Use Plan and supporting statement of policies and principles, once adopted by the Parish Council, shall have the force of law.” However, members of the Parish Council say that the council does not plan to adopt the Land Use Plan itself by ordinance. Rather, it will adopt the plan by resolution. The difference is significant, since ordinances bear the force of law while resolutions only express intent.

Council members say the resolution will form the foundation on which the Parish Council plans to craft land use ordinances. They argue the Land Use Plan would be unwieldy and unenforceable in the form of an ordinance.

The danger of the resolution-based approach is that it could leave the Land Use Plan itself completely defanged, with only the good will of Parish Council members to carry on its program for change. It would indeed be unfortunate if the time and money that went into the New Directions 2025 effort were squandered.

In order for the suggested approaches to be effective, legal provision would have to be made to ensure that the plan cannot be altered except on a biennial or less frequent basis. Establishing biennial review would require an amendment to the St. Tammany Charter, which currently calls for annual review of the plan.

Bolstering Land Use and Transportation Plans

Through the New Directions 2025 effort, the St. Tammany community has set forth a plan for land use and a map illustrating generally where development should take place and what kind of development it should be. The Land Use Plan offers opportunities for economic development, new approaches to growth, and the environmental conservation that is the fondest wish of so many St. Tammany citizens.

While the Planning Commission approved the Land Use Plan, the plan it advanced contains noteworthy changes from the draft that emerged from the New Directions Steering Committee. In some two dozen places, the word “shall,” which implies a mandate, had been replaced by “should,” which implies only a recommendation. These changes would diminish the impact of the Land Use Plan, even if it were to be given the force of law. One planning official argued that, from a planning standpoint, St. Tammany is “not at the level of sophistication” required for a land use plan that carries mandatory language.



The emerging master plan is vague in other elements. For example, the New Directions Transportation Plan recommends that the Parish design a street network with multiple connections and direct routes, but is only vaguely descriptive when addressing the integration of the street network. Perhaps the most specific statement in the document addressing street networks suggests that the Parish “will work to enhance the interconnectivity of the existing roadway network. St. Tammany will strive for the establishment of a roadway system that allows multiple routes to reach a given destination.”

The document offers precious little on how the Parish might accomplish this, focusing primarily on highways and high-volume roadways. The Parish will require a document with more forceful language and greater specificity as to where and how connectivity will be accomplished. It may even require lines on a map, setting out precisely how the network of streets and thoroughfares should unfold.

Ultimately, a stronger, more specific mandate will be required to bring about the change to achieve St. Tammany’s vision. Whether at the level of a comprehensive zoning ordinance or a land use plan that indeed carries the force of law and guides zoning, the Parish will require guidelines that are more direct, more specific, and more restrictive.

Encouraging a diversity of development options

If the Parish is to achieve its vision of preserving the natural environment and creating livable communities, it will have to pursue, within a framework of transportation connections, a range of development options. They include:

- Traditional, mixed-use neighborhoods, which combine residential and low-impact commercial structures. St. Tammany’s suburban approach to zoning, which

generally operates on absolute separation of uses, diminishes opportunities for mixed-use development.

- Cluster developments, which build park-like settings into high-density residential developments. Although developers currently have this option under the planned unit development (PUD) approach, they have little incentive to use it in the ways that the Land Use Plan contemplates.
- Retail nodes, placing high-impact retail activity at major intersections, rather than along strips of highway. The Parish currently allows, but does not mandate such an approach.

Currently, the primary mechanism for providing diversity in development is the PUD. PUDs, by definition, provide a mechanism for flexibility in a milieu of rigid zoning designations, allowing, among other things, mixed uses, increased density, setback variation, and clustering. Without proper guidance, however, PUDs can become a mechanism for unwarranted discretion. Existing PUD guidelines in St. Tammany are inadequate, vague, and lacking in reasonable limitations. As a result, a PUD can be approved regardless of whether it adheres to a comprehensive plan, meshes with adjacent land uses, or harmonizes with neighboring developments.

Parish officials have indicated that they are considering new guidelines for a wider diversity of developments. It is important that the PUD or other regulations governing such developments be clear, mandatory, and reflective of the Land Use Plan. The regulations should provide a framework that furthers the goals of the plan and eliminates the overly broad discretion that could subvert the community’s objectives. The development of carefully crafted regulations for a formalized variety of allowable planned unit developments – such as mixed commercial-residential

communities, traditional urban neighborhoods, and nature-friendly cluster developments – would help to provide flexibility within appropriate parameters.

Protecting the Green from Sprawl

The Tammany Trace and the Parish’s work to acquire Camp Salmen are recent success stories that are universally embraced in the Parish. Residents cherish the rural character of much of the Parish. Flood plains help keep existing development dry. It is the clear will of the citizens of the Parish that, as much as possible, St. Tammany’s natural environment should be preserved.

While creating options for denser developments can help to preserve green space, St. Tammany would be running a great risk to rely solely on such options. For effective land-use reform, St. Tammany will need effective zoning restrictions that guide development in the direction of the community’s vision.

One way to conserve green space is through zoning designations with either small (traditional city-sized) lot maximums or very large (farm-sized) lot minimums. Planners consider those sizes in between, such as those mandated by the current zoning in St. Tammany, to be most interruptive to woodlands and rural areas.

Another way of preserving large, unbroken swaths of green space is to require that development occur in a contiguous, highly connected manner. This can be done by restricting residential and commercial zoning to areas adjacent to developed ones, or by imposing steep impact fees for developments that are not adjacent to existing street and sewer infrastructure.

To impose impact fees, courts have determined that the jurisdiction must not charge fees that exceed an appropriate share of the cost to be incurred in



accommodating the development. In other words, the fee must be commensurate with the burden new development creates (roads and other infrastructure, schools, etc.). The farther afield a development stands, in general, the greater the burden on government services, particularly infrastructure. The closer to existing services, the less the burden. Impact fees are a proven tool for keeping tax rates down and development efficient.

Existing “impact fees” in St. Tammany are not mandatory but can be used if voluntarily offered by the developer. Such fees are negotiated and do not measure the impact of new development. The Parish has hired a consulting team to develop a mandatory impact fee program. One planning official says the mandatory fee program may be imposed as early as January.

Consolidating Sewer Infrastructure

Parish officials are currently devising a plan to establish consolidated sewage franchise areas. Such an approach would make sewage treatment easier to monitor and more reliable, officials say. In addition to regional franchising, the Parish is currently looking at using impact fees to nudge new developments toward existing infrastructure. Unlike the cities of St. Tammany, the Parish itself does not offer a comprehensive sewage treatment system. Because the Parish has no dedicated millage to create or maintain such a system, officials say it is highly unlikely the Parish will offer one in the near future.

CONCLUSION

When the people of St. Tammany talk about what they love most about the Parish, phrases like “small-town charm” and “natural splendor” come forth. One would be hard-pressed to find a resident who trumpeted the long waits in traffic, the strip retail, the despoiled waterways, or the hum of

chainsaws at work on a new subdivision. If small-town charm and natural splendor are to be preserved and enhanced, if traffic congestion and pollution are to be confronted, St. Tammany must come to terms with the fragmented, sprawling patterns that have defined its recent development. It must reach back to the patterns that sum up its idyll: town and country.

Towns are characterized by a variety of interconnected neighborhoods, with residential and low-impact commercial separated only by streets and blocks, if at all. They are characterized by high-density development, with green areas set aside for public parks or squares. They provide residents with basic services, such as reliable sewage treatment. They offer a street network with a variety of options for reaching a given destination, and do so in a pedestrian-friendly manner. One need not look to a planning journal to find such places; they exist, right here in St. Tammany, in downtown Covington, Mandeville, and Slidell, among other places.

Country, on the other hand, is characterized by unbroken stands of woodland and viably-sized farms. It is characterized in south Louisiana by wetlands and waterways that protect residents from flooding, provide wildlife habitats, feed fishermen, and offer families weekend recreation. It is the way that, very recently, the vast majority of St. Tammany was.

To achieve these objectives, St. Tammany must undertake a stringent policy program that forces growth into compact, integrated, environmentally sound, and occasionally mixed-use patterns, a policy program that clearly and strongly asserts that the preservation of rural and natural areas is a central priority. It must take a comprehensive, rather than a piecemeal, approach, staking out areas for town-style urban growth as distinct from country. It must make institutional changes that severely limit the government’s discretion over land use, keeping citizen-endorsed

plans front and center. Ultimately, of course, it must accomplish these goals within a context of city-parish cooperation, so that infrastructural efficiencies flourish and advances made in unincorporated areas are not offset by wrong-headed decisions within municipalities.

This is the moment of truth for St. Tammany Parish. If it treasures “the lush pine forests, the quaint small-town character, the flora and fauna of the wetlands, the clean air and water” vaunted in its Vision Element, it must take action and take it soon. It must protect its natural assets from incursions by profiteers. It must force development into a more compact, connected, and integrated pattern. It must remember what it once was, and aspire to be so once more.

RECOMMENDATIONS

BGR makes the following recommendations to St. Tammany Parish:

To Give New Directions 2025 Staying Power

- Through amendment to the Parish’s charter or by ordinance, clarify that the master plan in all its elements will bear the force of law and, thereby, that all ordinances, as well as government and private actions, must conform to it.
- Through a charter amendment, limit amendment of the master plan to a frequency no greater than biennial.
- Strengthen the Land Use Plan by restoring the mandatory language that was replaced with weaker, advisory language by parish planning officials.
- Upon completion of the master plan, complete and adopt a comprehensive zoning law that conforms to the Master Plan.



- Foster coordination between the Parish and municipalities and work toward a partnership to produce a fully integrated land use plan.

To Further the Town-and-Country Vision

- Restrict development to sites adjacent to existing residential and commercial areas.
- Advance final land use and transportation plans that firmly mandate infrastructural connectivity, demanding multiple through-street connections (including new major thoroughfares) for all future residential developments.
- Find resources, whether through impact fees or taxes, for the acquisition of land by the Parish for public parks and preserves.
- To promote more sensitive development of land, replace the existing quarter-acre minimum lot size with a far greater minimum (farm-sized) for rural areas and,

in developing areas, with a range of smaller lot sizes that can be used in developments with significant, integrated common space. Developments that include smaller lot sizes should be subject to appropriate overall density restrictions.

- To preserve rural areas and natural assets, create and enforce strong zoning standards that provide protection from incursions by residential, commercial, or industrial development. This means the creation of a zoning system that is largely immune to the discretion of government officials.
- Encourage sensitively designed cluster and mixed-use communities to provide a greater diversity of development options and more efficient development of land.
- Replace the current planned unit development (PUD) guidelines with a more sophisticated approach that includes clear, mandatory regulations and pro-

vides a formalized variety of allowable planned developments. Require that developments conform to the Land Use Plan and harmonize with adjacent land uses. Each proposal for a planned development should clearly specify the classification of development for which the developer is applying.

To Protect the Waterways from Sewage

- Where appropriate and feasible, nudge new developments toward cities that offer dependable and environmentally sound sewer service.
- Require that, where city sewer services are absent, development tap into regional or consolidated sewage treatment systems.
- Enforce requirements that existing private sewage treatment systems meet minimum environmental standards.

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