

Lafayette's trends assessed



Advocate staff photo by BRYAN TUCK -- A line of cars travels along Verot School Road on Friday morning. An assessment of needs in Lafayette touches on a long list of issues that could be addressed by a comprehensive plan for the parish, including traffic.

Meetings set to address future of area

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LAFAYETTE — A lack of regulations coupled with cheap land in rural areas have encouraged strong growth outside the city of Lafayette while the urban core of the city has declined, according to a wide-ranging assessment of trends in the parish.

The assessment, prepared as part of an effort to create a long-term growth plan for Lafayette Parish, also noted that local governments have strained to keep up with needed roads, water lines and other infrastructure for the new developments, while the scattered subdivisions are threatening the agricultural character of rural areas.

Residents will have an opportunity this week to consider the assessment and what it means for Lafayette's future in a series of forums held to craft Lafayette's comprehensive plan for growth and development in the coming decades.

The assessment touches on a long list of issues that could be addressed by the plan, including traffic, residential and commercial development patterns, the economy, water service, public safety and economic development.

The assessment highlights several positives for Lafayette: low unemployment, continued job growth, declining crime rates, a thriving arts scene and a vibrant local culture.

But there are challenges.

The largely unregulated growth in rural areas is a key issue in the assessment, which also noted that a local economy heavily dependent on oil and gas and health care could benefit from diversification.

The fire and police departments have struggled to keep up with the growing population, the assessment found, and there are few viable alternatives to driving, such as bike paths.

Kevin Blanchard, chairman of the citizens committee guiding the development of the plan, said he was struck by the disparity in parks and recreation spending in a comparison the assessment made of Lafayette and other cities.

Per capita yearly park spending in Lafayette is \$54.70, compared with \$69 in Austin, Texas; \$100 in Baton Rouge; and \$150 in Raleigh, N.C.

"We could do so much better," Blanchard said.

The first series of community forums on the comprehensive plan were held in April.

More than 600 residents came together to talk about what they like and don't like about Lafayette.

The forums this week will move away from the "wish list" format and address what the area might look like if things continue as they are with no planning efforts, said City-Parish President Joey Durel.

"We pretty much have an idea of what the people said they really want from Lafayette 20 or 25 years from now," Durel said.

"Now, it's what Lafayette will look like if we keep doing what we are doing."

The idea, he said, is to have residents think about what needs to be done to make the ideal vision of Lafayette a reality.

“Hopefully, now that we have our facts in front of us, we can decide which direction we are going,” Blanchard said.

City-parish government awarded a \$1.2 million contract to the planning firm of Wallace, Roberts & Todd to oversee the creation of the plan.

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