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## Upcoming comprehensive city plan to be unveiled next week

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Parts of downtown Lafayette, the Uptown Lofts apartments and an older home are pictured on South Pierce Street Thursday in Lafayette. By Leslie Westbrook January 30, 2014 / Leslie Westbrook, The Advertiser

Written by **Claire Taylor**

Next week, residents will get their first look at a draft of the proposed comprehensive plan for the city of Lafayette and unincorporated parts of Lafayette Parish.

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The plan is the culmination of more than a year of meetings and community workshops where residents were invited to help decide how and where development should occur in the city of Lafayette and unincorporated areas of Lafayette Parish over the next 20 years and beyond.

More than 2,000 residents, homeowners and business owners weighed in, and an advisory committee and consultants came up with a series of goals, policies and around 400 action items that make up the meat of the comprehensive plan.

Some are simple: Beautify entrances to the city, build pedestrian and bicycle-friendly sidewalks and streets, and preserve the cultural and historic character of neighborhoods.

Others are more complicated and technical: Write a Unified Development Code, develop a regional drainage and green infrastructure

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A sign announcing the proposed Parkview Tower, which would include retail and residential spaces, is seen on Jefferson Street Thursday in Lafayette. By Leslie Westbrook January 30, 2014 / Leslie Westbrook. The Advertiser

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plan to reduce flooding, and fund construction of roads and sewers based on a parishwide Land Use Map.

Why a comprehensive plan?

In 1960, Lafayette Parish was home to about 40,000 residents. By 2010, more than 120,000 called it home and thousands of others commute daily from surrounding parishes to work or attend higher education institutions.

As large tracts of land in the urban core became scarce, developers found they could purchase more land and cheaper land farther and farther from the city's center. Sugar cane fields and other farm land was transformed into residential subdivisions, providing residents with larger homes at reasonable prices.

But that kind of development at times proved costly to government responsible for extending roads, drainage and utilities far from existing infrastructure and to residents forced to drive on insufficient roads.

Property owners in unincorporated parts of the parish who pay less in taxes than those in the city of Lafayette increasingly demanded more services from a parish government without sufficient funds.

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According to Kevin Blanchard, chief development officer with Lafayette Consolidated Government, the average commute is 20.4 minutes, the same as in Baton Rouge and only 32 percent of the parish's streets have sidewalks, some of which are crumbling and others along major thoroughfares like Ambassador Caffery Parkway and Kaliste Saloom Road are too narrow and close to the roadway to be safe.

The situation is only expected to get worse as 90,000 new residents are expected in Lafayette Parish by 2030, leading to 25,000 acres of new residential development, 20,000 acres of which is in unincorporated areas and 37 percent of which is expected to take place in flood-prone areas, all of which will further stretch Lafayette Consolidated Government's budget.

"If we don't change, it will cost people more and they'll be disappointed with the results," Blanchard said.

The comprehensive plan is a way for government to "get a handle on how we make decisions with money for public infrastructure," he said.

The plan is a "tool to judge return on investment" and consider the short-term and long-term cost to taxpayers of various projects, Blanchard said. "It's going to make sure we don't bankrupt our government because of sprawl."

The comprehensive plan is supposed to guide local officials — planning commissioners, LCG employees and the City-Parish Council — in how and where and on what to spend tax dollars based on the preferences expressed by residents during more than a dozen workshops.

### BIG IDEAS

In order to make the comprehensive plan more easily digestible, those involved in preparing it have organized the plan around four recurring themes they're calling Big Ideas: Revitalize Neighborhoods,

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Re-envision Natural Resources, Reinvent the Hub City and Refine Government. There are many goals, policies and action items in the comprehensive plan to make each a reality. Listed are just a few for each Big Idea.

### REVITALIZE NEIGHBORHOODS

- Create a redevelopment authority to help turn blighted areas into usable properties.

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- Design the Interstate 49 Connector — a 5.5-mile elevated highway that will roughly follow Evangeline Thruway through the urban corridor of Lafayette — in a way that improves accessibility while protecting neighborhoods.
- Strengthen gateways to the city of Lafayette, including the north gateway near Interstate 10 and I-49.
- Build a diverse mix of housing for people at different stages of life, strengthen neighborhood character and improve access to recreation and healthy foods.

The benefits: Replacing abandoned, blighted properties with new homes and businesses generates taxes, beautifies neighborhoods and reduces crime. Improving gateways will present an improved image to visitors, businesses and individuals looking to locate in Lafayette. Offering a variety of housing may attract and retain residents, workers and improve affordable housing options.

The challenges: State and federal governments, not Lafayette Consolidated Government, will design and build the elevated interstate. Elevated interstates have historically led to blight and crime in surrounding neighborhoods. Redeveloping blighted properties can increase the cost of housing and drive poor and middle-class residents out of historic neighborhoods near the center of Lafayette.

### RE-ENVISION NATURAL RESOURCES

- Improve the health of Bayou Vermilion.
- Develop a regional drainage and greenway infrastructure plan that utilizes open and natural spaces instead of piped and paved drainage systems to protect from flooding.
- Make Lafayette more attractive by reducing litter, illegal signs, overgrown ditches and unkempt rights of way.

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The benefits: A cleaner, healthier river may lead to more use. Better access to the river and other waterways for those who don't live on the river may increase awareness of the need to keep waterways clean and provide a better quality of life for residents. A more attractive city with less litter and temporary signs cluttering major intersections also is a quality of life issue as is a more natural, attractive way to handle drainage.

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The challenges: Water that drains into the bayou comes from a wide area, including farms, over which local government may have no control. Drainage is a regional issue. Water does not recognize parish boundary lines, so this will take cooperation and coordination regionally. Much of the land fronting Bayou Vermilion is privately owned and contains homes, so public access may be limited. Lafayette already has ordinances restricting temporary signs and prohibiting littering but enforcement is nearly impossible.

### REINVENT THE HUB CITY

- Develop a “complete streets” policy that means designing and building streets for the safety of all users — pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, transit riders.
- Make Lafayette’s culture and arts a more visible part of the community’s image.
- Work with community partners to educate and fully prepare students for success in the workplace.
- Create “small area plans” as prototypes showing how desired land use, urban design and connectivity can enhance future development.
- Expand Lafayette Utilities System’s fiber network and service.
- Expand Lafayette Regional Airport infrastructure and support efforts that encourage use of the airport and attract airlines.

The benefits: Complete streets would be safer for pedestrians and bicyclists. This could lead to more people exercising and fewer vehicles on roadways, reducing traffic problems. Additional airlines would mean more options for fliers and would be attractive to businesses considering Lafayette. Expanding LUS fiber could lead to economic development by attracting businesses and entrepreneurs in the tech industry.

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The challenges: A lack of money. Building airport infrastructure and marketing requires money. The airport is governed by an independent commission. The City-Parish Council has no authority over the airport commission's decisions or budget. Expanding LUS fiber and building and improving streets also require money, and voters in Lafayette Parish have not been receptive to new taxes.

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## REFINE GOVERNMENT

- Streamline regulations that govern development into an easy to use Unified Development Code.
- Use the comprehensive plan as a guide to analyze potential return on investment before spending tax dollars on capital projects like roads.
- Invest in mixed-use developments that are connected to existing infrastructure in order to reduce government spending on costly road, utility and service extensions in isolated areas.
- Use the comprehensive plan as a guide to prioritize transportation spending in targeted centers and corridors and encourage street connectivity to reduce congestion and the need for costly road projects.

The benefits: Comprehensive plan writers say this will make it easier to build the different types of development envisioned in the comprehensive plan (e.g. River Ranch developers had to get waivers of existing codes to build the upscale residential and commercial subdivision.)

The challenges: Opponents, including some developers, say the UDC and master plan will be more restrictive, more of government telling people what they can and cannot do with their property. Developers have expressed concerns that a unified development code will be more restrictive.

## UNIFIED DEVELOPMENT CODE

The Unified Development Code will be one of the central pieces of the comprehensive plan, and likely one of the most controversial pieces.

Developers, bankers, engineers, realtors and builders are working with LCG employees and a contractor to craft the UDC.

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Existing codes and regulations for development — subdivision and zoning regulations, building codes, road design standards, traffic requirements, landscaping requirements, sign requirements — are found in various LCG departments, from planning to traffic to utilities.

The UDC committee is reviewing, rewriting and consolidating those regulations into a single document, a playbook, that should streamline the permitting process for developers and ensure that everyone is playing by the same rules.

The UDC will contain the rules that will make the comprehensive plan work, Blanchard said.

It may take eight months to complete the UDC before it's sent to the City-Parish Council, he said.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

The comprehensive plan will be unveiled to the public Feb. 11 and 12.

The plan will then be presented to the planning commission and City-Parish Council for approval.

Work will continue on the UDC through most of 2014.

Pieces of the comprehensive plan may be implemented throughout coming years using ordinances that must have City-Parish Council approval.

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