



## Plan Direction

### Principles and Key Concepts

The Ascension Parish Comprehensive Plan establishes 8 key principles that will help shape future growth in the parish.

1. **Sustainable Growth Patterns** - Fiscal sustainability where we grow efficiently and cost-effectively. The plan encourages smart growth development and discourages growth patterns that cause disproportionate increases in cost of services. Growth should occur where it avoids threats to health and safety, where it can be supported with adequate infrastructure and where it does not result in negative impacts on existing roadways.
2. **Focus growth in centers and areas served by utilities, leave the rest rural** – Residents want to preserve the extensive agricultural and open space land surrounding the urban areas within the parish. They also want the benefits of more efficient street and utility services. More compact development patterns will support both of these objectives. This Comprehensive Plan includes an emphasis on mixed-use ‘centers’ as a key growth pattern, accompanied by encouragement of development around existing municipalities more than low density development across the parish. Rural areas occur outside sewer districts. These concepts represent important new directions in the community’s efforts to balance the pressures for outward growth with the desire to promote smart growth.
3. **Create a Jobs / Housing Balance through Economic Development** – The plan identifies where new employment opportunities can locate in order to support and promote economic development and help reduce commuting to employment centers outside the parish.
4. **Provide a Balanced Transportation System** – Traffic congestion was identified as a major negative impact as a result to high paced, low-density development feeding onto rural standard roads. The Comprehensive Plan encourages an interconnected road network that provides alternative modes of transportation (transit, bike walking). The plan identifies key corridors that need capacity improvements to sustain, and allow, new development in appropriate locations.
5. **Provide housing for the needs of the entire community** - The plan encourages, more variety in housing types (besides just large lot single family homes) that will better meet the needs of our diverse population—singles, couples, families, those just starting out in their own home, children who have left home, retirees, etc – and at all income levels.
6. **Opportunities for an active community** – As the parish is transitioning from a rural parish to a more populated parish, residents increasingly seek greater opportunities for both active and passive recreation. Because Ascension Parish began as a rural parish, sidewalks, parks, trails and recreation facilities often associated with larger populations have not been established. The plan considers opportunities for an active community through compact development where people can walk to the store, a trail system along bayous, and a new pattern for street design that includes sidewalks and bike lanes. The plan also encourages



that a more extensive park system be created, in centers and other locations as development continues.

7. **Respecting our physical setting** – The recreation and visual aspects of the natural environment are key parts of Ascension Parish’s “crown jewels” that attract residents and businesses to the parish. At the same time, wetlands and floodplains play an important role for drainage and protection from flooding. The plan recommends less development in, and much stronger protection of, floodplain and wetlands—to avoid negative impacts on existing development and habitats.
8. **Retaining our Historic assets** – There are several historic places within the parish including Houmas House and downtown Donaldsonville. Tourism associated with these areas provides some alternative revenue sources for the parish. These historic areas are a foundation to the Ascension Parish culture and should be preserved.

## By Topic: Plan Goals, Strategies, Policies and Actions

### *Sanitation*

#### Summary

- Homes in a significant portion of the unincorporated areas of the parish have individual sewage systems that allow untreated or partially treated effluent to flow into open drainage channels and bayous. Even for private package treatment systems (that serve larger subdivisions) there is not an effective on-going inspection/certification system to assure that the effluent continues to meet adequate standards. The technology employed in the current/older package treatment systems will not be able to meet new water standards anticipated to be instituted by LDEQ<sup>1</sup>. Pollution levels in many water bodies in Ascension Parish significantly exceed acceptable limits.
- Left unaddressed, there is the real possibility that development in Ascension Parish could be suspended, and/or that the parish could be required to undertake significant, expensive remedial action.
- The parish and US Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) have developed a master plan to create a regional sewer treatment plant and extend sewer lines through much of the central portion of the parish.

#### Goals

To have surface water (bayous, ditches, rivers and ponds) and ground water (that feeds wells) in the parish that meets standards for public health and the health of wildlife and natural systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference Chuck Berger presentation.



## Strategies

Serve suburban and urban levels of growth with central sewer that can meet high water quality standards.

In areas not served by central sewer treatment, and in the interim before a parish-wide system is complete or available, assure that new and existing systems meet acceptable discharge quality levels.

## Policies

1. Existing individual and package treatment plants will be brought to parish discharge standards within 10 years.
2. Prior to availability of central sewer service, new individual and package treatment plants may be installed if:
  - o The system meets acceptable water quality discharge standards.
  - o The users of the system agree to connect to the parish-wide treatment system once the parish-wide system has service lines within 50 feet of the subdivision perimeter and, immediately after hook-up, the individual or package plant is properly decommissioned.
3. The parish-wide sewer treatment district is intended to be expanded to serve all areas of the parish that desire to be served, and that can be served cost-effectively.
4. The cost of the sewer system shall be borne by the users of the system.
5. Sewer effluent that does not meet parish water quality discharge standards shall not be discharged into drainage ditches or surface waters of the parish.
6. Residents and businesses within the sewer treatment district shall be required through service agreements to connect to the new sewer system when the service lines reach their area.

## Actions:

1. Designate (or create) a staff position whose duties will include:
  - a. Implement the existing ACOE Sewer Master Plan and associated business plan
  - b. Prepare a sewer implementation schedule
  - c. Regular inspection of all sewer discharges in the unincorporated parish and monitoring water quality (coordinate with LDEQ)
  - d. Coordinate with other parish departments to ensure concurrency with road design
  - e. Work with the ACOE to modify the sewer boundary as appropriate.
2. Determine actions to be implemented if individual non-compliance after 10 years.
3. Develop parish standards for acceptable water quality discharges.

## ***Drainage & Floodplain Development***

### Summary

- The parish storm drainage system, in general, consists of open roadside ditches that drain to creeks, streams, bayous and rivers within the parish.
- The surface ditches of the parish also receive partially treated effluent from the septic and MODAD tanks used by many of the single family homes in the parish. This partially treated effluent contributes to the significant pollution levels found in the bayous and ponds throughout the parish.
- These roadside ditches are relatively deep, with sloped banks, which mean that they add a significant width to the overall road right-of-way. When it is necessary to widen a road, the ditch



must be relocated laterally too. The cost of acquiring land for roadway expansions, including the added width for ditches, is often equal to (or greater than) the cost of the road construction itself. This suggests that the parish convert from surface ditches to a piped stormwater system buried within the road ROW. Before this can be done, the sewer discharges have to be put into a sanitary sewer system, which is anticipated to be installed gradually throughout the more developed areas of the parish.

- Much of Ascension Parish falls within the 100-year flood plain.
- Development in the floodplain is a significant issue confronting the parish. The current regulations require any fill on a property in a floodplain to be offset by an equal excavation-- to result in no net loss of flood storage. However, this regulation is only applied to major subdivisions, not to individual homes. Furthermore, there is no regulation, or monitoring, of filling not associated with a building permit. So it is possible, unrelated to a development application, to undertake significant filling before without commensurate excavation, thus reducing overall flood storage.
- The Corps of Engineers has recently re-mapped the flood plain zones in Ascension Parish, in some cases significantly raising the 100-year flood level.
- After people build in the floodplain public funds are often required to provide flood protection and/or rehabilitation.

## Goals

Manage drainage in the parish to protect health and safety and protect the natural functioning and health of the environment.

## Strategies

1. Adopt and implement stormwater Best Management Practices (BMPs).
2. Prevent uncontrolled filling of floodplains.
3. Limit development within a floodplain to densities that will not raise flood levels on adjacent properties.
4. Develop a parish-wide drainage master plan.

## Policies

1. The parish shall comply with the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) as required by Section 402 of the Clean Water Act.
2. The parish shall encourage the use of BMPs in stormwater management design practices.
3. Post-construction BMPs shall be implemented when possible.
4. "No Adverse Impact" approaches are required for development within the floodplain. (Any fill must be offset by commensurate excavation to mitigate possible impact on other properties in the watershed.

## Actions

1. Complete and adopt a Floodplain Management Policy.
2. Develop a parish-wide Master Storm water Plan to understand the differences between the various drainage basins located within the parish, the different criteria that may be established for storm water improvements within those basins and the possibilities of creating larger facilities that can serve a greater number of individual properties.
3. Establish a permit process to monitor any filling in a floodplain (even without development).



4. Coordinate the installation of storm drains with the construction of roads.
5. Establish, and keep current, storm drainage design standards.
6. Require all drainage plans submitted to be signed and sealed by a Registered Professional Engineer in the State of Louisiana.
7. The parish shall participate in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).
8. The parish shall maintain up to date Flood Insurance Rate Maps.
9. The parish shall comply with the requirements for participation in the NFIP.

## **Domestic Water**

### **Summary**

- Ascension Water Company, a franchise of Baton Rouge Water Company, supplies the majority of the east bank with domestic water.
- A 20-year franchise agreement was established in 2006 between the Ascension Parish government and Ascension Water Company. The agreement permits Ascension Water Company to

*“lay, repair, construct, maintain, relocate and operate water mains and pipes and other related equipment in, under, along and through the public property, streets, avenues, alleys, roads, highways, and other parish rights-of-way (within the jurisdiction of the Parish Council of Parish of Ascension, and not within the incorporated limits of any village, town, or city), for the production, transmission, distribution and sale of potable water to the Parish of Ascension and its inhabitants.”*
- The franchise agreement obligates Ascension Water Company to install fire hydrants throughout the parish, and this program is expected to eventually provide hydrants to most of the parish.
- According to Ascension Water Company, they have adequate supply, pressure and infrastructure to support the type and extent of growth projected in the Comprehensive Plan, as well as for the region, and are making preparations for water supplies beyond that.
- On the west bank, the City of Donaldsonville supplies water to its citizens
- ACUD1 presently serves the water needs for the west bank of the parish outside the City limits by purchasing water from the People’s Water, Iberville and Assumption Parishes.
- Wells are adequate to service some rural areas of the west bank.
- Water lines, along with other non-parish utilities, are typically located in a servitude outside the road ROW. When roads must be widened (usually collector, and larger, roads) the parish or the State must pay the cost of acquiring the additional land and relocating the utility lines.

### **Goals**

Provide domestic water to the residents of the parish in quantity, pressure and quality that meets or exceeds health and safety standards.

### **Strategies**

1. Work with Ascension Water Company to assure that their plans and priorities are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, including: sizing and phasing of water lines, installation of fire hydrants, and water pressure facilities.



2. Encourage ACUD 1 to supply water, as feasible, to new development on the west bank.
3. Reduce future road costs by placing future utility installation within the road ROW, so they will not have to be relocated for road widening.

## **Policies**

1. Developers should be required to install infrastructure needed to support domestic water connection and adequate fire flow.
2. The parish will work with ACUD 1 to supply domestic water to new urban-level development on the west bank outside the limits of the city.

## **Actions**

1. Regularly coordinate with Ascension Water Company to be sure that their plans are consistent with parish plans and priorities.
2. Evaluate the potential to locate utilities within road ROW for minor collector, and larger, roads.

## **Transportation**

### **Summary**

- There is a high level of commuting out of the parish for higher paying jobs in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and into the parish for employment in industry, education, and commerce.
- Many of the roads in the parish were originally designed for rural (farm-to-market) use with narrow widths and moderate structure. These roads are now experiencing much higher traffic levels, which is causing significant congestion and physical deterioration.
- The parish road system funnels a large portion of parish traffic onto a relatively few connector roads, which contributes significantly to traffic congestion.
- Many of the key collector and arterial roads in the parish are under state jurisdiction, and the state is challenged fiscally to keep up with the needed maintenance and capacity improvements.
- Many roads in the parish do not have official rights-of-way. In some cases the adjacent property ownership extends to the center of the road<sup>2</sup>. In other cases, the right-of-way extends only to the width of the pavement (sometimes as narrow as 20'). In still other cases there is an assumed parish right-of-way that extends to the outside-top-of-bank of the adjacent drainage ditches. When parish roads need to be widened, a significant portion of the total cost is the purchase of right-of-way associated with: private ownership under the road, the amount of land needed for surface drainage ditches (see Drainage above), and additional land for servitudes to relocate private utilities.
- The parish is responsible for approximately 400 miles of roads, including many small roads and driveways that serve individual residences. The parish is currently able to maintain its roads on a 15-20 year cycle, which is not keeping up with the life cycle of the roads themselves (needing maintenance every 10-12 years).
- A preliminary alignment has been released for the long-discussed Baton Rouge Loop, a beltway around Baton Rouge. A preliminary review of the proposed loop alignment (generally around the

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<sup>2</sup> In which case, some assert, the property owner may have been paying taxes on the land under the roadway.



outside edge of the parish) suggests that it will not contribute much to the transportation needs in Ascension Parish.

- With the exception of a few subdivisions, there are virtually no sidewalks, walking paths or bike paths to allow safe, convenient alternative forms of travel (and/or exercise) in most of the unincorporated part of the parish.
- To “catch up” (remedy existing) with road maintenance and capacity problems, the parish can only use taxes, grants and other funding sources. To “keep up” in the future, the parish may also utilize impact fees (applied to new development).”

## Goals

Provide safe, efficient travel throughout the parish—that accommodates automobiles as well as other modes of travel.

## Strategies:

1. Connect the key "missing links" between the major roadways in the parish to provide multiple ways of getting around and reduce traffic concentration on a few roadways.
2. Plan for eventual transit connections between existing and new centers and other major destinations (parks, schools, etc.).
3. Build to the plan—extend and widen streets in a manner that enables and encourages centers and other plan features.
4. Assure that new subdivisions are designed with multiple accesses and connectivity to existing or potential adjacent developments.
5. Make sure that major new streets in the suburban and urban areas of the parish are “complete streets”—that make provision for bike, pedestrian and, where appropriate, future bus service. In rural areas, focus on narrower road sections that maintain rural character.
6. Assist with sidewalk installation in existing neighborhoods and commercial areas that so desire.

## Policies

1. Small roads and driveways that do not receive a minimum level of public use should be analyzed by the Parish Council and determined if they should be removed from the parish’s maintenance responsibilities (ownership reverts back to owners) so as to focus parish efforts and funding on roads that benefit most of the residents.
2. Any road-widening in the outlying areas of the parish should be designed to preserve the parish’s rural character.
3. The parish will promote connecting key “missing links” between major existing roads, and require multiple access and connectivity from future development.
4. Allow exception if an alternative ped/bike route is available.
5. Significant modifications to existing commercial developments should require compliance with new sidewalk standards.

## Actions:

1. Develop a Transportation master plan that identifies classifications (level of service expectations) for all of the roads in Ascension parish.
  - Identify key roadways that need to be widened
  - Identify key intersections that need to be improved



- Identify key roadway connections that need to be made to improve our overall circulation patterns
  - Establish access management standards for each roadway classification.
2. Enforce current development standards that require new subdivisions to connect to existing stub-outs or public access servitudes or provide stub-outs for future development:
    - Adopt street connectivity standards for new development regarding block length and street spacing
    - Modify development standards for minor collector, and larger, roads to include:
      - Sidewalks or multiuse paths where appropriate on all new streets (except in rural areas)
      - Bike lanes on minor collector, and larger, street types and bike-able shoulders for rural areas (right-of-way permitting).
  3. Research funding needed, and potential sources, to enable needed parish-wide “catch up” road improvements and maintenance.
  4. Define the criteria for commercial improvements that would trigger the need for compliance with new sidewalk standards. Investigate and adopt cost-effective mechanisms, such as a sidewalk improvement district, to make compliance more affordable.
  5. Develop a program to encourage existing neighborhoods to install sidewalks.
  6. Develop criteria (such as levels of service) for minimum public use for roads that should be maintained by the parish.
  7. Require adequate streets, sidewalks, bike lanes, and transit infrastructure/service to be in place concurrent with any new development.
  8. Obtain authority to use procedures similar to those used by LADOTD, to enable the design and construction new roadways to proceed while fair market value is being determined for any ROW acquisition.
  9. Explore the potential for creating a trail system in the urban/suburban areas of the parish, including:
    - Research feasibility and cost of using drainage ways
    - Community support
    - Land owner issues
    - Create a demonstration project
  10. Work with land owners to investigate the feasibility, and begin advance land use planning (if appropriate), for a commuter rail station in the North Gonzales/Prairieville area.
  11. The Parish Council should evaluate whether or not parish funds should be directed to make improvements on state roads to address local transportation needs.

## **Recreation**

### **Summary**

- The parish currently provides and maintains 80 acres of neighborhood parks (approximately 5 acres each in size) and 80 acres of community parks (approximately 15 acres each in size). There are also approximately 160 acres of school properties that serve as parks. Together, the parks and schools represents a level-service of 3.6 acres/1000 population for both neighborhood and community parks, which is below many communities (Iberia Parish has an LOS of 5.3 acres/1000). While the parish provides parks facilities, including a number of ball fields for active sports, recreation programs are provided by volunteer organizations—which do not reach the entire population.



- As the parish continues to evolve toward a more suburban condition there will likely be greater pressure to provide a more complete range of recreation facilities and programs.
- There are very few parks with trails for walking or biking, and no trail systems in the unincorporated areas.
- The parish encourages, but does not require, new development to dedicate parkland.

## Goals

Provide recreation facilities, management, funding and programs, to meet the needs of parish residents in the most cost-effective manner possible.

## Strategies

1. Provide parks cost-effectively by working with municipalities, service clubs, non-profit foundations, etc.
2. Ensure that small neighborhood parks are included in the development of “centers.”
3. Develop a few large parks in the parish with quality facilities for active recreation.
4. Pursue creating a system of trails along bayous in the urban/suburban areas of the parish, utilizing the public easement if possible.

## Policies

1. The parish will work with the school district, volunteer organizations and other public and quasi-public partners to cost-effectively expand recreation facilities and programs for residents of the parish.
2. Neighborhood parks should be developed jointly with future schools.
3. New development should provide neighborhood parks to meet the needs of its residents, at the parish level-of-service. Development that does not warrant at least a 4 acre park is encouraged to provide the cash equivalent so the parish can develop a park using the proceeds from multiple smaller developments.
4. The parish will work to achieve park levels of service of 4 acres / 1,000 for neighborhood parks, 2 acres / 1,000 for community parks.

## Actions

1. Develop a parks master plan that identifies regional, community and neighborhood parks and open space or address parks in sub-area planning.
2. Amend subdivision requirements to require dedication of parks.
3. Explore the potential of providing parks and recreation through a parish-wide recreation district (including Gonzales, Sorrento, Donaldsonville)
4. Expand the role and capacity of PARC.

## Housing

## Summary

The recent growth is a combination of families moving *from* East Baton Rouge Parish in reaction to certain negative qualities there (substantially worsening traffic, declining school quality)



and coming to Ascension for specific positive qualities (excellent public schools, country setting, less costly housing). This is especially true in the Prairieville area.

The majority of the housing inventory is single-family detached homes.

A significant portion of the housing in the parish that is affordable to certain work force levels is not of a level of quality, safety or in locations that are appealing to that work force.

Lack of housing that is affordable and attractive to our work force negatively impacts economic development, job growth, and the financial capacity of the parish to provide basic services as well as amenities. Lack of affordable and attractive homes impacts our ability attract school teachers, emergency service workers, government employees, store clerks, etc. A full range of housing in our community provides shoppers that support existing stores and businesses and help attract new ones.

Over the long-term, the market will respond to housing demand in most sectors. However, in the short term (which can be decades), the market will focus on only the *most* profitable segments, leaving other segments unattended. Since it is in the broad community interest to have housing for its workers, at times it is of public benefit to remove barriers, and incentivize, certain kinds of housing development.

Mobile homes are a significant component of the parish's supply of affordable housing, yet mobile homes (as a manufactured product) tend to depreciate in value more quickly than traditional homes.

## Goals

Preserve existing, and create new, housing opportunities for working families.

Provide a complete "housing ladder" with homes to accommodate a broad range of life stages, with quality product at each price point. Future residential growth to include rural estates and large lot homes, as well as suburban lots, single family small lots, town homes, and small multi-unit dwellings (apartments, condos).

Ensure that the demand to live in Ascension Parish remains strong:  
that housing stocks (quality and volume) and residential development patterns are attractive to businesses and their workers  
that we preserve the quality of life, the "crown jewels," that makes the parish attractive.

## Strategies

Protect the character and value of existing homes and neighborhoods.

Provide housing that is affordable for a broad range of those that work in the parish, especially including new families and those starting out in the workforce.

Rather than create large, repetitive areas of a single housing type, encourage new development to include a range of home types in a variety of settings, that better reflect the variety of small neighborhoods that exist in the parish today. Development types could include:

- Infill of existing cities (Gonzales, Sorrento, Donaldsonville)
- New, compact villages and neighborhood centers
- New subdivisions ranging from large lot estates to modest lots and even small areas of attached homes.

Continue to provide opportunities for rural living.

Ensure that new neighborhoods provide appropriate "quality of life" amenities (parks, nearby schools, convenient shopping).

Make sure the new development preserves parish "crown jewels" that are desired by the housing market:



- Good schools
- Country setting
- Rural areas with working farms
- Convenient access to natural areas.

1. Gradually replace existing, and prevent addition of more, substandard housing in parish.

## Policies

1. The parish shall encourage housing that is attractive to a wide range of life stages (singles, starter families, families with children, empty nesters, retirees), spread throughout the parish.
2. Focus new, compact housing in centers (relatively small and generally located at existing intersections primarily where commercial development has already been established) and other areas that have convenient access to employment, shopping, commuter routes and future transportation corridors—in ways that strengthen existing parish character and country setting.
3. Discourage locating incompatible densities adjacent to existing neighborhoods; require buffers and gradual transitions of density between higher density development and existing adjacent residential
  - Facilitate the transition of those living in mobile homes, if desired, to dwelling types that appreciate or better preserve investment value; encourage the maintenance and upgrades of mobile home developments to assure they are safe and attractive living environments.
  - The parish’s efforts to encourage housing affordable to the local work force will focus primarily on:
    - Encouraging voluntary efforts
      - Employers to assist employees to obtain local housing (down payment assistance, etc.)
    - Incentives to supplement market forces, such as:
      - Non-profit organization to take advantage of private sector grants
      - Zoning that allows a variety of housing types
      - Density bonuses for meeting parish affordable housing objectives.

## Actions

1. Create a task force of a cross section of parish residents to evaluate specific strategies for incentives, programs, regulations and other tools to assure that an adequate balance of appropriate types and quality of housing are provided in the parish. With the task force, establish parish minimum acceptable housing standard.
2. Monitor, and annually report to the Parish Council on, the availability of housing affordable to workers in the parish:
  - a. The number of existing units, by type (single-family homes, mobile homes, apartments, etc. as well as rental vs. ownership)
  - b. The quality of the units and neighborhoods
  - c. Location of units relative to quality of life amenities
  - d. Identify any existing substandard housing units by lot and parcel
3. Develop design guidelines to illustrate how a variety of housing types can be incorporated compatibly into new and adjacent to existing development (buffers, transitions, etc.).
4. Develop a set of tools to encourage quality, affordable homes in new subdivisions in the parish.
  - Examples might include:
    - a. Provide a bonus density of new development that provides at least 10 percent of all new homes to be affordable (such as to a fifth year school teacher in the parish public schools).



- b. Provide matching funds to owners to upgrade their properties when owners agree to keep units priced affordably for ten years.
  - c. Seek grants and special financing for:
    - First time buyers that are below 120% Area Median Income (AMI)
    - Transitioning mobile home residents with incomes below 80% AMI
    - Buyers (but not residents) who agree to rent property to families with incomes below 80% AMI where the following conditions apply; substandard mobile home was removed from inventory.
  - d. Consider tax incentives (reduced sales tax rates) to businesses in Ascension Parish that employ workers with HH incomes between 80-120 % AMI, when the business agrees to
    - Offer down payment cash assistance to first time buyers
    - Provide second trust home purchase financing to any teacher with three years tenure and the recommendation of the School Board for any unit not already discounted as part of the inclusionary policy.
5. If voluntary and incentive-based approaches do not achieve rental housing that meets minimum acceptable standards:
- Establish rental property owner registration and inspection program (less frequent if in compliance)
  - Establish fines for owners of rental units that are substandard.

## **Land Use**

### **Summary**

- Over the decade preceding the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, Ascension Parish grew rapidly and continues to do so. The parish population in 2010 has grown to approximately 100,000 and, according to various forecasts, it is projected to double in population by 2030—adding another 100,000 population.
- Approximately 25% of parish residents live in the three incorporated municipalities (Gonzales, Sorrento, Donaldsonville). These communities have the capacity to absorb additional growth internally, and to extend services to their immediate vicinity—but are constrained by a perceived financial penalty due to current sales tax sharing policies in the parish.
- Approximately 75% (75,000 people) of parish residents live in the 39 unincorporated communities and areas of the parish. Thus, with little expansion of existing communities, Ascension Parish is well on its way to transitioning from a rural parish into a ‘suburban parish,’ –having a full range of densities from large agricultural areas to urban centers.
- On a per-household basis, it is more expensive to provide, and maintain, infrastructure in a low-density, spread out pattern than in more compact development. Similarly, once development crosses the threshold from rural to suburban, service needs and expectations tend to rise. This puts the parish increasingly in the ‘business’ of providing urban (suburban) services, for which taxes have to go up disproportionately.
- There are a number of natural constraints to development, including a significant portion of the parish that is within the 100-year floodplain.



- The parish already faces a number of challenges in meeting the demands of the existing population, including need for additional schools, additional fire stations, and a high level of traffic congestion on narrow rural farm-to-market roads throughout the parish.
- The school district is charged to find land for new schools, and does so in response to where growth appears to be occurring, and where land can be obtained most affordably. As a result, school sites often occur just outside existing development areas—which causes a need to extend roads and utilities—which in turn opens up new areas for development that are not necessarily consistent with overall planning objectives and infrastructure efficiencies.
- There are a number of reasons to try to accommodate additional growth in the parish:
  - Limiting growth is not popular and is difficult to achieve
  - Appropriate growth will increasingly support local business development that will stem the loss of sales tax revenues that will in turn allow the parish to better provide basic services as well as improved quality of life amenities.
- Growth has been coming to Ascension Parish for specific positive qualities (excellent public schools, country setting, access to natural areas, less costly housing). It is important that if new growth is to have public benefit, it must also maintain the parish’s quality of life.

## Goals

To accommodate growth in a manner that preserves a high quality of life in the parish, allows workers in the parish to live in the parish, attracts and keeps businesses, and allows the parish to provide services and amenities in a cost-effective manner.

## Strategies

1. Allow more compact growth to occur where it can be supported by adequate sewer infrastructure (see Sanitation section above). Keep other areas of the parish more open, rural in character, until they can be served by adequate sewer treatment in the future.
  - WITHIN proposed sewer treatment zone, connection requirements will be determined by the policies of the sewer district. In general it is assumed that most properties will connect unless they can demonstrate that the property size and treatment system will result in no effluent leaving the site that does not meet water quality standards.
    - Assume overall density of 4 du/ac for infrastructure planning
  - OUTSIDE sewer treatment zone density shall be determined by approved neighborhood plans and / or special area studies adopted as amendments to the Master plan. Future development is encouraged to be comprised of large lots that maintain rural character and that can demonstrate that the property size and treatment system will result in no effluent leaving the site that does not meet water quality standards. Until demonstrated otherwise, a minimum lot size of 2 acres is recommended.
2. Encourage compact development that can provide for those who do not wish to maintain large acreages, in targeted areas where infrastructure and services exist or are planned that can support the associated population, such as adjacent to existing municipalities within the parish and in three types of centers outside municipalities, such as: small “town” centers, smaller “village” centers, and very small “hamlet” centers.
  - Commercial Corridor along Airline Highway.
3. Preserve existing, productive (large, efficient) agricultural properties, primarily:
  - Darrow area
  - NW of Donaldsonville.



4. Preserve rural character in:
  - Areas within the sewer district that wish to remain rural
  - Outlying areas not served by central sewer
  - Floodplains
  - Areas between cities and centers (to avoid continuous sprawl).
5. Retain existing businesses and industry and encourage additional businesses and expansion of industry in order to promote a stronger jobs / housing balance, create jobs for citizens, and create revenue for the parish.
6. Assist the school district in identifying potential areas for growth to aid in the future location of school sites.
7. Assure that an adequate amount of land is designated and zoned for light and medium industrial uses in the parish.
8. Expand development and services in a planned, incremental fashion to assure that future development will not pose a significant burden on existing residents for the cost of the extension of services and infrastructure.
9. Implement the Comprehensive Plan in a consistent manner between the parish, its municipalities, and other service providers.
10. Improve the first impressions and general visibility of the parish. Convey to visitors and businesses the pride of Ascension Parish by establishing 'gateway' monuments on major roadways leading into the parish.

## Policies

1. The parish values the continuation of opportunities for agriculture and considers productive agricultural land to be a major natural resource. The retention of prime and unique agricultural land outside the urbanizing area is encouraged. Primary emphasis for preserving rural character will be in areas around:
  - Geismar
  - West of Donaldsonville
  - East side of the parish
  - Adjacent to Sorrento.
2. Preserving the viability of existing industrial operations in the parish is a high priority.
3. Prohibit development that will increase flood levels in the parish.
  - WITHIN sewer service area, higher densities are encouraged, and they may be achieved in floodplain areas by clustering on fill that is either balanced with on-site excavation, or with fill credit achieved through a floodplain banking program.
  - OUTSIDE of sewer service area, lower overall densities are encouraged that are consistent with rural character and sewer treatment system limitations. Clustering may be supported when served by appropriate interim treatment systems (see Sanitation above).
4. Protect industrial uses in the parish by only allowing adjacent uses that are compatible with typical heavy industrial operations and practices.
  - Appropriate uses within the ½ mile Transition I area will be:
    - Heavy commercial
    - Medium industrial
    - Light industrial



- Rural residential
  - Agriculture
  - Recreation
  - Appropriate uses within Transition II area are:
    - Light industrial
    - Rural residential
    - Agriculture
    - General commercial (excluding shopping centers and malls).
5. Within the Transition I and II areas the following are prohibited:
    - a. PUD's
    - b. SPUD's
    - c. TND's
    - d. Residential Subdivisions greater than 1 unit per acre
    - e. Retail establishments where the sales floor area is greater than 3,000 sf
    - f. Schools.
  6. The parish encourages, and will work with, cities to accommodate urban growth in and adjacent to their boundaries, reducing the demand for urban growth patterns in the unincorporated areas of the parish.
  7. The parish will make land use and infrastructure decisions consistent with the goal of supporting and encouraging the development of centers that compliment the style and character of the surrounding neighborhoods. Center types are generally envisioned to be:
    - A compact, mixed-use, "town" center in the west Prairieville area, near I -10/Airline Hwy. This type of development is flexible in size and location, but should be created within contiguous property assembled and approved for that purpose, generally not anticipated to be larger than 100 acres.
    - Village Center --smaller (10 to 25 acres) mixed-use centers at locations near existing major intersections, such as:
      - Darrow
      - Geismar
      - Dutchtown
      - Burnside/Darrow
      - NW of Donaldsonville
      - St. Amant
      - French Settlement.
    - Hamlets—small (under 10 acres) centers at existing minor crossroads that consist of stores carrying convenience goods, and small housing clusters, including attached dwellings and live-work apartment-over-the-store housing types for owners or employees of the establishment.
  8. For development that requires municipal services, those services not provided by the parish shall be extended by a municipality or provided by a utility district .

### **Actions:**

1. Working with local residents, develop detailed plans for sub-areas of the parish (communities such as St. Amant, Darrow, Modeste etc.) and adapt the broad objectives of the Comprehensive Plan to the site specific conditions of individual areas.
2. Modify regulations and create incentives to allow the creation of centers:
  - Zoning designations
  - Density incentives



- Processing incentives
  - Infrastructure priorities (roads, sewer)
  - Not approving development that would preclude centers (rezoning according to CP)
  - Transit priorities (locating stops, stations).
3. Increase the enforcement of existing restrictions on development in the floodplain. Develop standards for maximum fill heights, side slopes or other criteria to prohibit new development from greatly changing the character of existing residential.
  4. Develop a definition, and create zoning for, light and medium industrial uses.
  5. For active agricultural properties, the Parish Council should consider adopting tools that will protect them against incompatible uses and associated conflicts, such as:
    - Very large lot zoning (20 ac.+)
    - Right-to-farm legislation
    - Gradual transition of uses (feathering densities)
    - Buffer zones.
  6. Consider and adopt techniques to preserve rural character, such as:
    - Minimum lot sizes and property frontage dimensions
    - Clustering to achieve a mix of property sizes
    - Large setbacks from roadways
    - Not allowing abrupt changes in adjacent uses (feathering densities).
  7. Consider techniques to encourage existing cities to accept a significant portion of future growth that is seeking urban conditions. Promote infill, redevelopment and expansion of existing cities through techniques such as:
    - Modify sales tax sharing agreement to allow cities capture a larger (50% max) portion of the sales tax due to new annexations, to make it more feasible to extend urban services immediately adjacent to their boundaries
    - Establish commercial “non-compete” areas near cities to avoid raiding local sales tax
    - Exempt areas adjacent to existing communities from required participation in the parish sewer treatment system, in exchange for extension of city services
    - Create flood plain mitigation bank to allow more efficient infill of small lots in or adjacent to city growth areas.
  8. Work with the School District to:
    - a. Identify future school sites consistent with the objectives of the Comprehensive Plan (e.g. in/near centers)
    - b. Develop plans for compact school buildings that reduce land cost
    - c. Coordinate the development and sharing of schools with adjacent parks
    - d. Utilize land banking and land exchanges to acquire appropriate schools sites.
  9. Work with Ascension Economic Development Corporation to identify an appropriate target amount of light and medium industrial land to be designated in the parish.
  10. Work with business community to create and regularly update (5 years) an inventory of land uses (developed vs. available) to track utilization rates, jobs/housing balance, etc.
  11. Work with Corps of Engineers to modify the sewer treatment system boundary to include designated centers, to adjust phasing to help implement the Comprehensive Plan, and to identify criteria for future expansions of the boundary to include other areas of the parish.



## **Environmental Resources**

### **Summary**

- In the 2008 Zoning Map, approximately 43% of Ascension Parish was designated “conservation”. These areas contain significant wetlands and are vital areas for sporting, fishing, hunting and recreation. Protecting and conserving this important resource is important to the residents of the parish.
- The environmental quality of surface waters in the parish is a concern. The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has set TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) levels for some of the waterways in the parish and is regulating them as part of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin study. It is likely that the current levels in those water systems will exceed the allowable TMDL levels. (As a requirement of the Clean Water Act, those levels would need to be reduced in order to be in compliance. The parish could be subject to fines, lawsuits and even a consent decree - similar to the court-ordered one in Baton Rouge - if those levels are not reduced. There is also the possibility that no more discharge permits would be allowed to surface ditches or creeks that drain to those waterways. This would eliminate the opportunity for future development and greatly reduce the value of the land in the parish.)

### **Goals**

Protect, conserve, preserve, and restore natural resources within the parish.

### **Strategies**

1. Protect ecologically sensitive riparian areas (along rivers, lakes and ponds) and wetlands that contribute to the health of fisheries as well as other wildlife.
2. Sensitive areas may be protected through federal permit requirements, cluster incentives (and dedication of open space), permanent conservation easements, setback requirements, and other tools.

### **Policies**

1. The parish will encourage protection of natural resources that are important to recreation as well as to the healthy functioning of the environment.
2. The parish supports and will help identify the applicability of, federal wetland regulations –through appropriate development submittal requirements and review.

### **Actions**

1. Adopt coastal zone management policies if the parish, or a portion thereof, is designated to be in the coastal management zone.
2. Evaluate the need for, and potential benefits, of providing incentives for natural resource protection, such as density bonuses, transfer of development rights, etc.
3. Designate environmentally sensitive areas to alert decision-makers in the development review process.



## ***Economic Development & Fiscal Health***

### **Summary**

- Parish government services are funded through a variety of sources, including property tax, sales tax, and grants.
- A number of elements of the Comprehensive Plan will require significant parish financial support over the next 20 years, including:
  - Road maintenance and improvements to “catch up” with existing needs
  - New road construction to “keep up” with ongoing development in the future
  - Sidewalks to allow safe pedestrian travel along major roadways
  - Exploration of the potential of a trail system, and perhaps a pilot project to demonstrate its potential benefits
  - An expanded park system to keep up with future growth
  - Etc.
- The parish currently experiences a significant “leakage” of sales taxes to nearby parishes as parish residents do major shopping in nearby retail centers (Mall of Louisiana in Baton Rouge, etc.).
- Growth creates a demand for services, and also, if properly managed, generates the revenue to pay for those services. A cardinal rule of the market is that “retail follows rooftops.” That is, new commercial, which generates sales taxes, usually comes only after there are sufficient homes to create a market. In turn, new businesses provide the jobs that continue to attract new residents.
- A key objective in any area is to broaden its employment base so that a downturn in one business sector will be offset by stability in another. For many decades industry has been a major employer in Ascension Parish, and a generator of significant property taxes to enable public services.
- Additional, diverse businesses will locate to Ascension Parish in response to natural growth, the predictability of the development process, and the attractiveness of the parish as a place for its employees to live.
- Growth in the parish has major effects on infrastructure needs and the provision of public services. The development pattern that has resulted over the last decade has been occurring randomly and without regard to consequences on utilities and road systems.
- The pattern of growth has a significant impact on the efficiency, and therefore cost, of infrastructure and public services. Low density, spread out growth is more expensive to install and maintain (on a per household basis) than more compact growth.
- The parish has a larger population than employment: the jobs:housing ratio is low (indicating significant out-commuting).
- Of the just over 35,000 jobs in Ascension Parish about 17 percent are in construction, 13 percent in manufacturing, almost 15 percent in retail trade, almost 8 percent in accommodations and food service, and just over 7 percent in healthcare. These industries account for approximately 60 percent of the jobs that exist in Ascension Parish.

### **Goals**

A solid tax base that will allow the parish to keep up with public services that are typically available in communities with high population growth and affluence and maintain a competitive tax structure, an important ingredient in encouraging economic development.



## **Policies**

The parish will direct growth so that it occurs in areas that are easily serviced and are near existing or planned utilities.

## **Actions**

**Goal:** The parish will encourage continued variety in commercial and employment within the parish.

### **Policies:**

1. The parish will provide adequate distance of transitional land use to preserve industrial viability.
2. The parish will retain an inventory of light and medium industrial properties already zoned, have infrastructure in place and are ready for development.

**Goal:** The parish will work to retain its assets – quality schools and rural character – and work to balance its housing opportunities to continue to be an attractive location for business and employers.

**Goal:** Ensure the provision of adequate, cost-effective community infrastructure and services to meet the growth needs without causing a negative impact on the parish budget.

### **Policies:**

1. The parish will manage growth to ensure fiscally responsible extension of infrastructure and minimize future parish operation and maintenance costs.
2. Growth will pay its share to address impacts to roads, infrastructure and services. The costs associated with new development should be borne by the new development and should not place a financial burden on existing residents.
3. Encourage compact and contiguous development in growth efficient areas (in close proximity to existing streets, utilities and public services).

**Action:** Create an impact fee system for new development.

