



**HOLISTIC APPROACH:** Walter Monsour says his long-term worth as CEO of the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority is affected by parts of the city he's previously never seen.

## A sense of community

*The East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority targets five neighborhoods for improvement—one in each majority-black Metro Council district.*

**BY DAVID JACOBS**

The Northdale/Standard Heights area, just north of BREC's Memorial Stadium, isn't exactly Baton Rouge's nicest neighborhood. But it's not the worst either.

Make the left turn onto Birch Street, look to your right, and you'll see a small abandoned house with green paint flaking off and four boards nailed across the front door. Moments later, you'll pass a charming bungalow with a fresh coat of bright yellow paint and a friendly "Welcome" sign on the porch.

There's a decent street grid here, and it's reasonably accessible to downtown, Mid City and the north Baton Rouge plants. But good luck convincing anyone with options to move into a neighborhood that's clearly past its prime.

Traditionally, when this city adds population, it spreads outward. Suburban sprawl is expensive; roads, bridges, sewers, and schools cost taxpayers millions. The further people live from where they work, the worse traffic gets, especially on the interstate. Redeveloping the inner city may be the smarter way to grow, but if doing so was easy and profitable, it would have happened already.

Giving a nudge to the private sector in neighborhoods like Northdale is the

job of the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority, which was created by the Legislature in 2007 and met for the first time as a five-member board in April 2008. The RDA seeks to acquire vacant or blighted properties, clear the titles, and move them into productive uses, while seeking to revitalize some of the parish's poorest neighborhoods in the process. Other cities have had similar bodies for decades. Little more than an idea two years ago, the local authority now has a small staff, its own office space, access to \$65 million in funds and tax credits, and one of the most powerful men in Baton Rouge for a CEO. Walter Monsour says he wants to create a "holistic community."

"My long-term worth is tremendously affected by areas that I have never even seen before," he says. Most people who live in affluent neighborhoods like Bocage Lake, Country Club of Louisiana and Santa Maria might not give much thought to how the other half lives. But Monsour says the city's crime and blight affect everyone, including the wealthy.

"Either [blight] stunts the growth of businesses that are here, or it inhibits the businesses that want to come here; and that's not a good economic situation for anyone that lives here, regard-

less of where you are on the scale of things," Monsour says.

Redevelopment authorities are quasi-public enterprises subject to laws regarding public records and meetings, but they can do things Monsour couldn't do when he worked as Mayor Kip Holden's top administrator. RDAs don't have to bid everything out; they can be flexible in the entities they choose to work with. They can even take an equity stake in a development. Perhaps their most powerful tool is the "land bank." An RDA can intercept adjudicated properties that might otherwise be auctioned off to random speculators and assemble them into larger parcels that can be converted into meaningful, game-changing developments.

Monsour announced he was leaving Holden's office Dec. 22, 2008; one month later, the RDA board hired him as its first CEO—and first employee. At the time, RDA board Chairman John Noland called him "the ideal person to lead us in this formative stage." And with a salary package worth \$365,000 including benefits, he'd better be, others said.

Monsour has a law degree, has been a developer himself, and has experience in government and business; naming him to lead a body that bridges the public and private sectors wasn't a huge stretch. But with that salary, one presumes, the board could have attracted someone that has actually worked for a redevelopment authority, or maybe even lured away someone else's RDA director.

"We could have hired somebody for less money who had the kind of experience we need in this job, but it would have taken him at least a couple of years to learn the politics," Noland says.

"We got a \$60 million new market tax credit allocation right out of the chute, so I think we're getting our money's worth."

Monsour was the board's first choice; Monsour said yes, so a national search wasn't conducted. Tara Wicker, whose Metro Council district includes Northdale, says she was skeptical at first, but says Monsour gives the RDA instant credibility.

"The benefit Walter brings to the table is the power of influence," she says. "When Walter walks in the door, peo-

### ON THE INTERNET

For more information on the Redevelopment Authority, go to [ebrra.org](http://ebrra.org).

ple stand up and they tend to listen.”

RDA board member Van Mayhall Jr., who has been involved in CEO searches for the Baton Rouge Area Chamber and Capital Area United Way, says it's generally a good idea to pick someone who knows the community, as long as that person is qualified.

A consultant has been tapped by the RDA to lead the creation of five community-improvement plans. Northdale/Standard Heights, Scotlandville Gateway, Zion City, Melrose East and a segment of the Choctaw Corridor are the target communities, one in each majority-black Metro Council district. The first community workshop, for the Scotlandville plan, is scheduled for March 16. Those plans will be incorporated into the overall land-use plan for the parish, scheduled for completion in 18 months or so.

During the RDA board's pre-Monsour meetings, the consensus seemed to be that Old South Baton Rouge, the historic but run-down area between downtown and LSU, would get most of the early attention. Old South already has a master plan, and private developers are showing an interest in the area. Consultants with Plan Baton Rouge Phase II, downtown's newest master plan, pointed to Old South as a logical place to create the residential growth needed to sustain a vibrant city core.

## IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

**The five areas identified by the East Baton Rouge Parish Redevelopment Authority for revitalization are:**

**CHOCTAW CORRIDOR:** Choctaw Drive from Interstate 110 to Dougherty Drive

**MELROSE EAST:** Bordered by Renoir Avenue to the north, Lobdell Boulevard to the east, Florida Boulevard to the south and North Ardenwood Drive to the west

**NORTHDAL:** Bordered by Chippewa Street to the north, Interstate 110 to the east and south, and Kansas City Southern Railway tracks to the west

**SCOTLANDVILLE GATEWAY:** Bordered by Flicker Street and Central Road to the north, La. Highway 19 [Scotland Avenue] to the east, La. Highway 408 [Harding Boulevard] to the south and U.S. Highway 61 [Scenic Highway] to the west

**ZION CITY:** Bordered by Hooper Road and Ford Street to the north, Albatross and Lacey drives to the east, Sumrall Drive to the south and La. Highway 67 [Plank Road] to the east

SOURCE: East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority

But none of the five target neighborhoods is in Old South. Make no mistake, each of those neighborhoods needs help. But picking five sites in five districts looks more like politics, a way to keep the Metro Council on board, than strategic planning.

“We are a political animal, and the council is our boss at the end of the day—the mayor and the council,” Noland says. “I don't know if I would apologize for that ... I do believe it is a way to show each of the five council people that we're trying to get something started in their neighborhood.”

And officials stress the RDA isn't going to strictly focus on those five areas to the exclusion of the rest of the parish. They say if there's an opportunity for a successful project, the authority will jump on it. In fact, Monsour says the RDA is helping to redevelop the old Lincoln Theater in the heart of Old South and is considering getting involved in the area adjacent to the theater.

The RDA has \$500,000 to acquire foreclosed or adjudicated properties, \$3 million to rehabilitate hurricane-damaged rental properties, and \$2

million for small-business façade-improvement grants, gap financing for new projects, and the aforementioned community-improvement plans. Most important, the \$60 million in tax credits could be the key to attracting developers who have experience doing attainable, mixed-income projects. Such developers are scarce in Baton Rouge, where there's little history of blacks and whites of different income levels living side by side.

Redevelopment authorities can be selective about the developers they work with, choosing people who will invest for the long term rather than turn a quick buck and get out. But such public-private partnerships are rife with potential for cronyism. If a developer with ties to Monsour or Holden gets a sweet deal, there will be whispers, and rightly so. The RDA will have to do its part by operating “in the sunlight,” as Monsour puts it, while elected officials, community leaders and the general public will need to pay close attention to make sure deals and projects are happening for the right reasons.

“Everybody, in my opinion, has to watch this ship,” Wicker says.

**DAVID JACOBS** covers higher education, industry and quality of life. E-mail him at [djacobs@businessreport.com](mailto:djacobs@businessreport.com).



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