STAC Pilot Project for Safe Walking, Bicycling and Transit Use
Plans for Improved Target Area

The Challenge: Our streets are not safe for everyone.

In many parts of Baton Rouge, people are unable to use walking, bicycling, and transit as safe modes of transportation due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure. Without “complete streets” --that include safe sidewalks that connect destinations; intersections that allow for safe and convenient crossing; ADA compliance; and transit stops supported by sidewalks, crosswalks and shelters -- people who must walk, bike, or ride transit to their destinations are at risk. Furthermore, people who have alternatives are unlikely to choose these active modes of transportation.

In fact, Baton Rouge has been designated by the Federal Highway Administration as a “Focus City” due to the high number of fatalities suffered by bicyclists and pedestrians. As of 2016, Louisiana has the 6th highest rate of pedestrian fatalities in the nation and the 2nd highest rate of child pedestrian fatalities in the nation. With 167 pedestrian deaths between 2005 – 2014, Baton Rouge was ranked as the 19th most dangerous metro area for pedestrians in the country in Smart Growth America’s 2016 Dangerous By Design report.

Increasingly, chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are also being connected to elements of the built environment as they affect residents’ ability to access safe recreational physical activities and use active transportation modes. Baton Rouge has rates of obesity (34.8% vs. U.S. average of 28.7%) and sedentariness (38.4% vs. U.S. average of 30.2%) that are far higher than national averages and contribute heavily to high incidence of diabetes and heart disease.

Both pedestrian safety and health outcomes are worse in minority and low-income communities. Strategic investment in complete streets infrastructure is an important tool for reducing disparities; increasing access to jobs, training and services; and providing opportunities to use active modes of transportation that improve health and well-being.

Sustainable Transportation Action Committee: Developing Solutions

The Baton Rouge Sustainable Transportation Action Committee (STAC) was formed to address these issues in 2012 as a joint initiative of the Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX) and AARP Louisiana. This objective is consistent with CPEX’s mission to make every community extraordinary through planning, and AARP’s mission to create livable communities for people of all ages. STAC’s diverse and volunteer membership includes 40 members total, with 26 local organizations and 14 individual members committed to improving multi-modal transportation options for Baton Rouge.

STAC worked closely with other community stakeholders, City/Parish officials, and Metro Council members to develop a Complete Streets policy that balances the access, mobility, and safety needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users and motorists. The policy was unanimously adopted by the Metro Council in 2014, marking an important step forward for the City/Parish.

In efforts to accelerate the process of implementation and ensure that Complete Streets investments impact areas of greatest need, in January 2017, STAC embarked on a Pilot Project in East Baton Rouge City Parish where three Metropolitan Council Districts 6, 7, and 11 converge. The Pilot Project was designed to demonstrate what can be accomplished by using data and citizen input to identify priority investment areas and fostering multi-sector collaboration among the city, CATS, Planning Commission, DOTD, Healthy BR, and community stakeholders. The result is a comprehensive approach to implementing infrastructure improvements that provide the safety, convenience, and connectivity needed for people to safely walk, bike and ride transit to grocery stores, recreation areas, educational facilities and other daily destinations. Equally important, the Pilot Project has created a template for replicating the needs- and data- driven collaborative process in other areas of the city and state.

**Elements of Success**

**DATA**
Data describing existing transportation infrastructure; transit stops, shelters and usage patterns; intersection features and signals; history of crashes involving pedestrians or bicyclists; health indicators; and demographic data was collected and mapped for the area along with community assets such as parks, grocery stores, schools and other public service facilities. This data was freely available on the City’s Open Data BR online portal. Analysis of this data revealed several “hot spots” where there are significant confluences of heavy transit usage, crashes, poor health outcomes, and proximity to key destinations in the area. (See Appendix A– Data Collection and Analysis Report)

The Pilot Project targets a three square mile area bordered by North Acadian Thruway on the west, Lobdell on the east, Gus Young and Greenwell Springs on the north, and Government Street on the south. Sections of Metro Council Districts 6, 7 and 11 converge in this area. The area has been identified as low-income, high-need, with a high rate of health disparities and heavy transit usage.

**COLLABORATION**
The Pilot Project is modeling how agencies within EBR City Parish -- particularly EBR Department of Transportation and Drainage and the EBR Planning Commission -- along with CATS and LA DOTD, can work with Council Members and other local stakeholders to share information and resources, establish shared priorities, coordinate efforts and effectively apply Complete Streets Policies in the areas that will benefit from them the most.
COMMUNITY
The STAC Pilot Project also conducted outreach and collected community feedback through a resident and stakeholder survey that assessed preferences and perceptions regarding existing infrastructure, active transportation, and priorities for improvements. (See Appendix B – Community Survey Results). Residents were provided with information regarding health, safety and economic benefits of active transportation and complete streets infrastructure. The project will culminate with a well-publicized tour of the pilot area to allow stakeholders to experience first-hand the challenges of disconnected, inadequate pedestrian, bicycle and transit infrastructure and to hear about the proposed solutions.

VISION
The “greater whole” envisioned by the participants in this project is a cohesive area in which distinct residential neighborhoods, commercial corridors, and public assets are connected to one another via safe, convenient and attractive sidewalks, bike lanes and pedestrian crossings. Residents can easily incorporate walking, biking and transit use into their daily routines, increasing their levels of physical activity, improving access to popular destinations, and promoting greater social cohesion. Complete streets enhancements will energize economic activity, increase property values, and serve as a source of community pride.

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH
Though it is understood that implementation will occur incrementally by necessity, contingent upon resources and project development timelines, the recommendations listed below comprise a comprehensive approach to creating greater overall connectivity and improving safety throughout the Pilot Project area. Such an approach is necessary to ensure that the cumulative effects of individual investments result in a greater whole.

Pilot Area Recommendations

**Government Street**
Already in the planning and final design stages is a Government Street Road Diet program which is soon to be implemented and under construction by the end of 2017. The road will go from a 4-lane roadway to a 2-lane with a center turn lane. Within the present right of way this configuration will allow space for walking and bike paths with crosswalks at intersections. Street lighting must be evaluated in this area to ensure safety for this new design.

**Foster Drive**
On the east and west sides of Foster from North Boulevard south, sidewalks presently exist. However, the west side sidewalk is only 4’ wide and adjacent to the curb in areas which does not meet the current minimum standard of 5’ (or 6’ if adjacent to the curb). On the east side (on the Baton Rouge Community College side), the sidewalk is 5’ wide with separation from the roadway. The west side sidewalk also ends at North Boulevard.

The proposed Pilot Project recommends extending a walking path on the west side from North Boulevard to Florida Boulevard.

On the east side of Foster Drive, we recommend expanding the existing sidewalk on BRCC’s property to a multi-use path of at least 10’ and continue that path north to Florida Boulevard. At the bridge over the Canal, we recommend either a separate bridge for multi-use or extend the bridge such that a multi-use path could be incorporated.
Also on Foster, the Pilot Project suggests a pedestrian crossing mid-block between the YMCA and the proposed location of the Mental Health Crisis Center. The crosswalk would have to utilize the pedestrian refuge already existing in the striped median.

Again, street lighting along Foster Drive needs to be evaluated and possibly additional lighting installed.

It is recommended that the location of CATS bus stops on both the east and west sides of street be evaluated for convenience, safety and ease of use – and relocated as necessary. All bus stops and shelters should meet ADA standards of compliance. Benches and shelters should be constructed at each stop.

We recommend that the City review the segment between Florida and North Street to extend sidewalks on the east and west side of Foster Drive and signalized crosswalks at the intersection of Foster and Florida. This small-scale project will connect BRCC to the Road Diet project that is being proposed for funding through the Safe Routes to Public Places grant. Even if the grant is not awarded, sidewalks will provide pedestrian access to Foster Street businesses from the west entrance of Melrose Place and the North Street neighborhoods.

**Florida Boulevard**
Continuing the multi-use path from Foster Drive to Ardenwood on the South side of Florida Boulevard under the many oak trees is recommended. This path could be of permeable materials that will both protect the trees in this area and also be handicap accessible.

At the entrance/exit of BRCC on Florida Boulevard, the project recommends elimination of left turns onto Florida Boulevard from the BRCC parking areas. Vehicles departing BRCC would go east on Florida Boulevard, with a U-turn provided at the Cloud Drive traffic signal. In order to eliminate left turns from BRCC, the median on Florida will require some redesign to inhibit this movement.

Also, in this median, we would recommend a pedestrian refuge and plan to install a pedestrian activated signal and high visibility crosswalk on Florida Boulevard at the CATS bus stop locations which are on both sides of Florida near BRCC to enable safe passage for pedestrians in this area.

On both sides of Florida Boulevard, the Pilot Project recommends bus refuge areas dedicated exclusively to bus traffic with ADA accessible boarding/drop off. The length of these areas and transitions in and out of the areas will be evaluated by traffic engineering experts. The bus shelters on the north and south sides of Florida Boulevard along this segment may need to be moved back. The specific locations will be evaluated by DOTD, the City’s Engineering and Traffic Engineering staff, along with CATS staff to optimize the safety of not only the transit users but the pedestrians and potential bike users, as well as the motoring public in this area.

Along the north side of Florida Boulevard, the Pilot Project recommends a sidewalk (minimum 8’ wide) be created. Adequate street lighting along Florida Boulevard is required.

On the south side of Florida Boulevard adjacent to BRCC property, there appears to be at least one turnout that could be eliminated.

**Cloud Drive**
At Florida Boulevard, ensure that the signal timing provides for pedestrian and bike crossing. Also at this intersection, provide a left turn protected signal from Cloud and from the service road.

The Pilot Project proposes to add new sidewalk along Cloud from George Street to Government Street. All sidewalks north of George Street should be repaired and/or replaced. Other traffic calming measures should be considered that can accommodate the tree roots, including possibly narrowing lanes to reduce traffic speed.

The project would also include a proposed left turn lane from Cloud to Government Street. This would need to be coordinated with the Government Street Road Diet Improvements.

**Ardenwood**
The section of Ardenwood from Florida Boulevard to Renoir Avenue is a potential candidate for a road diet that would reduce the five-lane section to two lanes with a center turn lane with sidewalks and bike paths on both sides. A mid-block signalized crosswalk to accommodate transit riders should be considered along this corridor, along with the potential for a round-about at Renoir Avenue. This project would be eligible for Local Road Safety Program funding.
It is recommended that the location of CATS bus stops on both the east and west sides of street be evaluated for convenience, safety and ease of use – and relocated as necessary. All bus stops and shelters should meet ADA standards of compliance. Benches and shelters should be constructed at each stop.

**Within the Baton Rouge Community College Campus**

There is a need for a minimum 5-foot sidewalk from Government Street to the proposed roundabout on the edge of campus at Community College Drive on the south side of campus. The sidewalk could continue through the campus toward Florida Boulevard where it could connect along the north side of Community College Drive along the street at the old Fire Marshal’s office.

**STAC SURVEY:**

93% responded that having safe handicapped-accessible public transportation stops are important to them.

**Intersections in Target Area**

At all intersections in the target area, signage and striping indicators for pedestrians and bicyclists should be clear. There should be striped crosswalks for pedestrians at each crossing point and striped lanes for cyclists.

Traffic signal timing should be reviewed at all intersections. Best practices should be used in all plans for the target area.

Also, sidewalk plans should include preservation of existing valuable tree canopy and planting of additional trees for shade. Project plans should reference the preferred street tree list within the new Landscape Ordinance recently adopted as part of FuturEBR and consider partnerships with Baton Rouge Green and the American Society of Landscape Architects – Louisiana Chapter.

**In Conclusion**

Project plans should also reference previous neighborhood level planning conducted by Center for Planning Excellence in the Street Smart initiative (2014). CPEX worked closely with residents from Bernard Terrace, Capital Heights, Valley Park, and Webb Park to calm traffic, improve connectivity and increase bike and pedestrian access – recommendations can be found at www.cpex.org/street-smart.

The Baton Rouge Sustainable Transportation Action Committee (STAC) Pilot Project represents a prime opportunity to demonstrate the principles of the adopted Complete Streets Policy. Addressing the health and safety needs of our citizens by providing infrastructure upgrades that encourage people to walk, bike and use transit through delivers both immediate and long-term benefits to our community. We look forward to ongoing project planning and implementation.

We acknowledge this project would not be possible without the volunteer efforts of STAC Committee members and the resources provided by AARP Louisiana, Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation, Louisiana Cancer Prevention & Control Programs, Greater Baton Rouge Realtors Association and the National Realtors Association. Other in-kind services were provided by ELOS Environmental, LLC, Forte and Tablada, and Center for Planning Excellence. For more information, please visit www.cpex.org/stac.

This report was presented to Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome on July 6, 2017.