

Baton Rouge Area Foundation



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Firm Picked to Create Master Plan for BR Lakes *With public input, plan will guide restoration and creation of destination*

SWA Group was picked to create a master plan for saving the Baton Rouge lakes and making them into a destination that harmonizes public interests with those of people who live around the lakes. The firm was chosen Monday from four finalists that presented at a public meeting at the Manship Theatre.

To guide their decision, the selection committee used comments expressed by those in attendance. On the committee was a representative of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, which initiated the project and is underwriting the work, as well as leaders of LSU, BREC, city-parish government, Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Louisiana Department of Transportation, underwriters of the project, and lakes-area homeowners. LSU and the city-parish own the lakes and BREC operates Milford Wampold Memorial Park on Stanford Avenue.

“All the finalists were exceptional that the committee had to deliberate for several hours before choosing SWA,” said John M. Spain, who oversees civic leadership projects for the Foundation. “We thank all the firms that offered to create a master plan for the most valuable natural space in our parish.”

SWA is working in association with Jeffrey Carbo Landscape Architects on the project. The firms are aligned with both national and local companies on the project. The landscape architecture firm is known for work that includes Buffalo Bayou Promenade in Houston. Jeffrey Carbo designed the Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Arboretum in Orange, Texas. Firms working with them are Biohabitats, ETM Associates, Pros Consulting, Sherwood Engineering and Stantec. Samples of winning team's work is at BatonRougeLakes.org/planner

Next, the Foundation will negotiate and sign a contract with the winning firm. Planners should begin their work within months and deliver a strategy by next summer. Like the selection of SWA Group, the plan itself will also be shaped by public input, both at community meetings in the fall and online through the MindMixer platform, scheduled to launch in the coming weeks as part of BatonRougeLakes.org

“We learned from the downtown revival strategy that a master plan only succeeds if the people lead with their ideas,” Spain said. “We need residents of this parish to share their ideas of what they want the lakes and their surroundings to become.”

The city's lakes were created in the 1930s by transforming an undesirable stretch of swamp into open water for the parish to enjoy. But today the lakes face problems, much bigger than even the conspicuous lack of safe pathways for pedestrians. On average, the lakes are only less than 3 feet deep and getting shallower each year. If nothing is done, the lakes will turn into mud flats.

In 2008, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recommended dredging the lakes and creating a sediment bypass system that would make them a healthy habitat for fish and native plants for more than five decades to come.

The master plan will build on the Corps' report and incorporate ideas from the community to determine what to do with the dredged materials. Hauling all the material offsite is too expensive and wasteful, so it must be used creatively to improve recreation while maintaining a natural ecosystem. Ideas already suggested include building paths around the lakes, as well as places to rent boats and bikes.

Planners will deliver a comprehensive design for the lakes and 45 acres surrounding it. Access is a priority, so this design will include a system of paths with connections to area neighborhoods, along with gateway suggestions for exits at I-10 and Dalrymple Drive. Planners are also charged with delivering a cohesive landscaping scheme, enabling way-finding and creating signs to support it, providing a habitat restoration strategy, and proposing methods for mitigating both noise and drainage from I-10. To achieve these ends, planners will also identify funding sources for implementation.

Recommendations for governing will be included to ensure the long-term upkeep and improvement of the City Park and LSU Lakes, along with the four smaller lakes that surround them.

The Foundation announced the lakes project – Destination: The Lakes – at its 50th anniversary

celebration in March. The work is being conducted in consultation with donors to the project and lake-area residents, as well as LSU, the city-parish, BREC, LDWF, CPRA, La. DOT and others.

With engineering and public outreach, master planning is estimated to cost \$750,000. The Foundation has secured support from fund donors, generous philanthropists, and other foundations.

Design Workshop Inc., EDSA and Kyle Zick Landscape Architecture were the other finalists.

About the Foundation: The Baton Rouge Area Foundation is among more than 700 community foundations in the United States. The Foundation works in two ways to improve the quality of life across South Louisiana. One, The Foundation connects donors who open charitable accounts with nonprofits that provide services to the community. Over 50 years, fund donors and the Foundation have granted more than \$350 million. Two, the foundation takes on projects that improve the quality of life. Contributions from members, who number about 600, partly underwrite these projects, which include master planning of the Baton Rouge lakes, education reform, downtown redevelopment, and creating The Water Institute of the Gulf to solve problems caused by rising seas and vanishing wetlands. People can learn more about becoming a member or opening a charitable fund by calling 225-387-6126.