For immediate release

July 22, 2014

Contact: Mukul Verma, Baton Rouge Area Foundation, (225) 387-6126, mverma@braf.org

Environmental study: Baton Rouge Lakes are in trouble

Five of six lakes don’t meet standard for being healthy, deepening would help

University and City Park lakes — and three of the four smaller lakes that surround them — are too shallow. Deepening the lakes would improve the natural ecosystems while keeping them from returning to swampland, according to report commissioned by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

What’s more, a soil analysis showed that material dredged from deepening the lakes would be strong enough to support shoreline improvements, such as building paths and small structures.

The Foundation commissioned the report by GEC Inc. of Baton Rouge in support of its master plan for the lakes, which will offer solutions for saving the lakes and making them a better gathering place in balance with people who live around them. At the end of June, a selection committee of stakeholders picked SWA Group, in association with Jeffrey Carbo Landscape Architects, to draft the master plan. SWA will begin work in September and deliver the blueprint next summer.

The Foundation hired GEC to provide research that would help SWA decide how much soil is to be dredged and what can be built with the material. GEC dispatched boats equipped with sonar and GPS to map lake bottoms and calculate depths, and drilled 12 soil borings to analyze soil composition.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries benchmark for a healthy lake is an average depth of at least five feet. GEC’s research shows five of the six lakes failed that standard.

There is good and bad news in the report. GEC used better technology to conclude University Lake is deeper than measured in a 2008 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers report. University Lake benefitted from an incomplete dredging in the 1980s, and now is 4 feet deep, on average.

But City Park Lake is much shallower, averaging only 2.8 feet deep, and the connected Erie Lake is shallower still at 2.2 feet.

Located behind LSU dormitories, Campus Lake is 3.4 feet, on average. Across the road, College Lake averages 5.6 feet. On Dalrymple Drive and a preferred fishing spot, Crest Lake is 4.7 feet.
GEC’s geotechnical investigation also found no sand layers beneath the lakes, therefore the risk of the lakes draining during excavation is minimal. The engineers also estimate the squishy top layer would shrink by 15%, or 0.3 feet, when dried, reducing the amount that might need to be dredged.

SWA will use GEC data and public input to deliver a comprehensive design for the lakes and 45 acres surrounding it, 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 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. If nothing is done, the lakes will die.

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 Foundation’s master plan will build on the Corps report.

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, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, La. Department of Transportation and Development, the Center for Planning Excellence and Suzanne Turner Associates. 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.

**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 225-387-612