

FuturEBR liaison: Job a good fit for skill set

by **Chad calder**

Advocate business writer

The mayor's new liaison to the team charged with implementing key parts of the city-parish's development plan said the group will likely start by pursuing easily enacted policy changes, but will also be prepared to strike at grant funding for any ambitious demonstration projects.

That team, which consists of six heads of local governmental and civic organizations, has only met publicly once, late last year. It has conducted the rest of its business at "staff-level" meetings, avoiding a quorum that would require a public meeting, said Walter Monsour, president and chief executive officer of the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority, which is in charge of scheduling meetings of the FuturEBR Implementation Team, known as the FIT team.

In addition to Monsour, the team is made up of Troy Bunch, the city-parish Planning Commission director; Chip Boyles, the city-parish urban development director; Sam Sanders, director of the Mid-City Redevelopment Alliance; Elizabeth "Boo" Thomas, president of the Center for Planning Excellence; and Davis Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District.

FuturEBR is the \$1.9 million revamp of the city's land-use and development code, created last year by a team led by Portland planning consultant John Fregonese using input from the public, the city-parish and planning entities like CPEX and the RDA, among others.

The planning commission is the entity in charge of working the goals and policy details into its land-use and development plan. The FIT team is in charge of working with the mayor's office to identify key projects or initiatives to pursue in the short term and figure out how to fund or enact them.

The group met publicly for about 15 minutes in December and said its first order of business would be taking résumés and recommending to Mayor-President Kip Holden whom he should hire as the assistant chief administrative officer assigned to work with the FIT team.

At the time, Monsour said that was expected to happen by February, though John Price, Holden's assistant chief administrative officer, wasn't publicly named as the

liaison until earlier this week.

Price was indeed hired as an assistant chief administrative officer in January — the mayor has three — but he wasn't initially supposed to be the liaison. The announcement at the time indicated the position of FIT team liaison was still open.

Price said Tuesday that he and Holden started to realize after Holden named him to the planning commission in February that he might be right for the FIT team liaison role as well.

“It was not the initial job that I sought out,” Price said. “But we came around fairly quickly to realizing that (implementing) FuturEBR ... was an area that I had a great deal of interest in and some skill sets they could use.”

Price said he read the development plan and has spoken with members of the implementation team individually about how they view FuturEBR relative to their respective roles with their organizations.

“I became more and more enamored with the idea that I would enjoy doing it and I'd be a good fit — no pun intended — with these people,” he said.

Despite its charge of submitting a formal recommendation to the mayor's office and receiving 196 résumés, Monsour said the FIT team has taken no action.

“None of the applicants we reviewed or interviewed came up to the level of credentials and personality that we would have recommended,” he said.

Monsour said that during the course of several meetings with Price “we found him to be the kind of person we would have picked to begin with and the mayor has selected him for that role and we think he'll function extremely well in that regard.”

Monsour, who's RDA is in charge of scheduling FIT team meetings, said the group has yet to have a get-together it believes requires a public meeting.

“The staffs have been meeting but we have only had one implementation team meeting and that was a public meeting,” he said.

Similarly, Planning Director Bunch said in an email that the group is indeed a public body but has only had one meeting that should be public. The others, he said, have been staff level.

Monsour said any meetings held have avoided having a quorum of officers. “There will be at least two, maybe three there, but we've made sure that no more than three be present at any particular meeting,” he said.

He said the staffs “are getting closer to working up some suggested projects to

submit to the team to consider and when we do we will have a public meeting.”

Price said that as far as any potential infrastructure or public works projects go, the city-parish is largely limited to the resources that are available. But he said there could be state and federal grants that could make some sort of project doable — for example, overhauling a street to add bike lanes and sidewalks.

More likely, he said, there are key policy changes that can make a big difference in quality of life in Baton Rouge. Working with CATS to improve transit, crafting a “complete streets” resolution to bring before the Metro Council are efforts Price said are more labor-intensive than revenue-intensive.

“The good thing about it is it’s a 20-year plan,” he said. “It’s not so much a revolution as it is an evolution.”

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