



All smiles

The East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority is focused on finalizing its plans for the Smiley Heights mixed-use development, now that it has completed a purchase of about 200 acres near Mid City for the project.

"We will begin working on a request for proposals for a master developer to see how the developers of the world would come in and take our vision and build out the whole property," says Walter Monsour, redevelopment authority president/CEO. "I would say we're looking at six to nine months to develop the RFP, get [proposals] returned, evaluate them and begin negotiations."

The authority's vision for Smiley Heights is ambitious by almost any definition.

When Monsour and others lobbied the Metro Council in April 2011 to use \$1.5 million of a disaster recovery grant to partner with it in purchasing the land, they said it would not only help to reduce the public school dropout rate, but would also assist in increasing job training, reducing crime, mitigating traffic congestion and providing mixed-income housing.

Located north of the Bon Carré Business Center between Ardenwood Drive and Lobdell Boulevard, Smiley Heights is planned as a mix of residential, retail and commercial developments anchored by a major expansion of nearby Baton Rouge Community College and the relocation and expansion of The Career Academy, an East Baton Rouge Parish School

System charter school.

The BRCC expansion is reported to include a \$26 million automotive training center, while the school system has pledged \$17 million for The Career Academy, which opened last August at Brookstown Elementary. Career Academy aims to integrate education and workforce training in a number of subjects to better prepare students for success when they seek higher education or enter the workforce. Enrollment is projected to increase from 200 to 700 in the first three years.

As Baton Rouge Area Foundation Executive Vice President John Spain told the Metro Council last year, "This is about taking 200 acres of raw land and changing peoples' lives. It's that simple."

The Metro Council signed off on using the grant funds for the land, and the East Baton Rouge Mortgage Finance Authority kicked in the rest in the form of a grant. The total cost was \$1.96 million, and the deal closed Jan. 31, about one year after the redevelopment authority began negotiating with the 11 nonprofits that had held the land—the majority owner being Tulane University.

"It was extremely difficult, as you might imagine, just to acquire the property," Monsour says. "The property owners had to be very cooperative on a number of fronts, and fortunately for us, all of them were excited about our vision for the property."

—Steve Sanoski