

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Our Plan is.....

This Strategic Master Plan is a detailed document which has been prepared for the Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge (BREC) for their use as they plan for the future. Its preparation has required a strong commitment by the Commissioners, staff and citizens-at-large over the period of one year from June of 2003 to June 2004. Recommendations contained in the Plan are representative of the requirements to improve existing facilities, construct new facilities, protect and preserve the environment, realign the organizational structure to ensure that BREC is positioned with its resources to successfully implement the Plan and to understand the fiscal requirements which will be the driving force of the overall effort.



### Our Plan's purpose.....

The purpose of the Plan is to develop consensus within the Parish for a preferred future for the park system, recreation programs and special facilities among the Commissioners, staff, key stakeholders and citizens-at-large. To guide the future direction of BREC, this Plan was needed to clearly articulate the accomplishments of the past while building on those accomplishments to address current trends and various needs which have been identified during the planning process.

### Our process.....



Development of the Plan in 2003 was pre-determined to be citizen-driven. Throughout the completion of 12 major tasks, citizens were involved in approximately 125 public meetings at the neighborhood level, focus groups, interviews and a statistically valid random survey. In each instance, their input was carefully considered as data from each major task was considered and final recommendations were drafted. The tasks which defined the scope of the planning process are:

- Citizen Involvement (interviews, focus groups, public meetings, statistically valid random survey)
- Demographic Analysis
- Park, Open Space and Facility Inventory and Analysis
- Historical, Cultural and Natural Resource Inventory and Analysis
- Recreation Program and Social Impact Analysis
- Analysis of Other Providers of Recreation Services
- Economic Impact Analysis
- Visioning Process



- Partnership Analysis
- Review of Policies
- Development of Projects and Costs
- Development of an Implementation Plan

The result of the planning effort is a Strategic Master Plan which is based upon Parish needs, that addresses park and open space planning, recreation program development, operations and maintenance issues and funding requirements. In the final analysis, the process addressed three critical questions:

- What is the BREC park system today?
- What should the BREC park system be in the future?
- How can BREC get there as it identifies and allocates its resources?

### **Our key findings.....**

BREC has amassed significant assets since its initial year in 1946 and has been the exclusive public agency responsible for the development of park facilities and recreation programs for the Parish. Accomplishments during that time include the acquisition of 5,600 acres of parks and development of 184 parks which total 3,500 acres; over 60 recreation and senior centers, numerous special facilities which include a zoo, observatory, extreme sports facilities, tennis complexes, golf courses, pools, equestrian facilities, historical sites; conservation areas; and several special events and recreation programs which provide organized and passive opportunities for citizens as they utilize the facilities within the department.

Several strengths of the current system have been identified. Those strengths include:

- Citizens share an appreciation for BREC operating with integrity, trustworthiness and fiscal responsibility
- A variety of special facilities mentioned in the preceding paragraph
- A variety of parks, both large and small to accommodate active and passive needs
- An autonomous parks and recreation operating system which provides advantages over other operating systems
- Equitable access for citizens to a variety of parks, open spaces, facilities and programs
- Commissioners and staff who work hard and care deeply for the citizens they serve
- Opportunities for all to participate in core activities regardless of ability to pay



A number of areas for improvement have also been identified. Those areas include:

### Philosophical

Citizens are seeking a different balance between the quantity of facilities and parks that have been provided and the quality of those same facilities.

### Fiscal

- Long term projections of General Fund revenues and expenditures indicate that the operating surplus continues to shrink consistently from year to year. From 2000 to 2002 the surplus decreased approximately 50%; from \$2,478,000 in 2000 to \$1,297,000 in 2002. In 2003, the surplus shrunk to \$500,000. By 2005, without re-allocating resources or additional funding from re-assessments, BREC will face budget shortfalls.
- Deficiencies of revenue may be projected as early as 2006 if revenues and expenditures continue to grow at their current rate.
- User fees and charges represent approximately 25% of total General Fund revenues. In 2004, user fees are anticipated to generate \$6,716,000 of total revenues of a total budget of \$26,977,000. Projections of user fee revenues are running unfavorably through 2004. Actual collection may be less than 24% of total revenue.
- BREC has always favored “pay-as-you-go” plans for Capital Improvements due to the high cost of financing a small bond issue; especially considering high interest rates that prevailed from the 1960’s through the 1990’s. Today’s low interest rates, combined with a favorable bond rating, may provide a suitable means of accelerating the schedule for some park improvement projects.
  - Operating and capital funding for BREC is approved by citizens through a Tax Plan. It is common to seek voter approval for capital funds but not operating funds. All BREC operating and capital funding is subject to voter approval (renewal) every ten years. Nationally, most agencies have a stable, continuing source of funds for operations and maintenance and only seek voter approval for capital projects.
  - Current operating and maintenance funding is not adequate to maintain the system at a level which meets, or exceeds, citizen expectations as expressed in the Strategic Plan public meetings.
  - The current philosophy to recover a relatively small portion of BREC’s costs for providing its services has been based on an unwritten agreement with citizens that their support of the 10-year Tax Plan will result in lower fees. The consultant is of the opinion that a greater percentage of costs must be recovered to adequately address the needs and impacts in today’s economy, to appropriately charge those who can afford to pay and to scholarship those who cannot afford to pay.

### Indoor Recreation Facilities



Indoor recreation facilities were evaluated from both a physical and functional perspective. From a physical perspective, it was determined that 73% of the 57 facilities that were audited are in need of repair. A summary of physical findings is as follows:

- On-site parking is inadequate based on building capacity
- Gymnasiums are provided with heat only, cooling needs to be provide to accommodate more indoor summertime activities
- Lighting levels need to be investigated for proper illumination
- Moisture within gymnasium spaces needs to be corrected. Floors have condensation during the summer morning hours, thus creating an unfavorable condition (providing cooling could resolve this problem)
- Exterior facades are in need of periodic cleaning, graffiti removal, etc.
- The facilities are structurally sound, however, major renovation work should be considered to address ADA and other updates for special program requirements/activities.

From a functional perspective, it was determined that the facilities do have some inadequacies as follows:

- The small size of existing facilities limits the type and number of activities that can occur within them.
- Facilities are not air conditioned, thus there are limits to the types of activities that can safely occur within them and the number of citizens who would want to use them when the temperatures warrant air conditioning.
- Most existing facilities include a meeting room and a gymnasium which provide good access to neighborhoods who are in need of those amenities.
- Interior finishes are not conducive to the creation of an environment in which users feel they are in a special place.
- Exterior finishes and areas immediately surrounding the facilities do not have good “curb appeal”, thus citizens have asked for something better. This is consistent with the overall reaction to BREC facilities as expressed by citizens during the planning process that they want more quality even if it means less quantity.



### Park System

One hundred and fifty five (155) parks were audited. Of the 155 parks, eight (8) were rated as excellent which equates to five (5) percent of the inventory that will require little or no action at this time.

- Eight (8) parks received a rating of excellent
- Thirty two (32) parks received a rating of good
- Ninety five (95) parks received a rating of fair
- Twenty (20) parks received a rating of poor

The total of fair and poor ratings equals one hundred and fifteen (115) parks; this is equal to seventy (70) percent of the inventory that will require a major investment in capital to bring these parks to an acceptable service level.

The most common issue seen during the audit was the increasing age of inventory and a lack of uniformity of maintenance operations. The inventory forms used for each park audit also recommend immediate action for more serious conditions and removal of graffiti. By prioritizing these issues, BREC will be able to develop budgets and schedules to deal with the needs of each park in an orderly fashion.

The second most encountered issue observed during the audit was the lack of ADA required access to parks and their facilities. New facilities in the BREC system are ADA compliant, but many older facilities need updating.

The system includes 143 playgrounds. There are a number of issues relative to playgrounds: a) it is not clear that most playgrounds are used by young people; b) maintenance and replacement of playgrounds is expensive; c) youngsters appear to be attracted to larger, more expensive playgrounds; d) the emphasis by BREC over the years on close-to-home parks and amenities is being altered to provide basic close-to-home parks and fewer amenities. The alteration to the old philosophy will allow for fewer, but larger, playgrounds and amenities within a reasonable distance of neighborhoods.



The system includes various sizes of close-to-home parks throughout the Parish. As is the case with playgrounds, many of these parks are not actively used, although, there is likely to be some passive use and appreciation by the mere fact that they are there. Citizens will typically prefer to use larger parks which feature more amenities for all ages of their family members.



Benchmarking with National Averages

The Parish of East Baton Rouge was compared with other communities from around the nation who share the same population density. From information provided by the Trust for Public Lands and a national market research firm who completed the statistically valid survey in the Parish as a part of this planning process, the following comparisons were made.

**Table Ex. Sum. 1: – Current Conditions**

Item	National Average	BREC
Park land acres per 1,000 residents	16.2	13.8
Percent of land area devoted to parks for low density cities	5.7% (this number is for cities as no number is available for counties/Parishes)	1.9%
Park spending per resident	\$80	\$77.48
Number of full-time employees per 1,000 residents	1.0	1.0
Percent of citizens using BREC recreation programs	30%	24%
Percent of citizens using BREC parks	70%	64%
Percent of citizens rating park conditions as excellent or good	27% rate park conditions as excellent 52% rate park conditions as good	18% 56%
Percent of citizens rating recreation program quality as excellent or good	30% rate program quality as excellent 55% rate program quality as good	30% 57%

Recreation Program

The recreation program was thoroughly analyzed and several recommendations were made. Those recommendations included:

- Identify the most appropriate role for the department as it considers being a direct provider of programs or a facilitator/partner with others to offer programs.
- Identification and commitment to the department’s focus on its core program. The core program includes: day camps, special events, adult and youth sports, senior programs, home school physical education and after school program, specialty facilities, and, youth and teen programs.
- Alter the organizational structure from six area supervisors to three.
- Consolidate the Community Resources Department and Recreation Departments.
- More emphasis on staff development and training.
- Improve the program registration process by offering a variety of ways for citizens to get involved rather than registering in person at a recreation center.
- Analyze and improve the existing marketing program by using logos, themes, direct mail to best customers, four brochures per year rather than two.
- Develop a vision and approach to programming which is consistent and includes a business plan for each program, program standards and a customer feedback program.
- Develop performance measures to determine repeat customers, customer satisfaction levels, cost per experience and cost recovery.

Cultural, Historical and Natural Resources

The 2003 BREC *Community Assessment Study* and 2004 *Community Attitude and Interest Survey* results show a public with a great interest in conserving natural resources areas. Through these surveys and other public mediums the citizens of East Baton Rouge Parish have voiced their strong desire for the leadership of this parish to include a greater focus on natural resource based recreation and conservation. In response to this need, BREC developed a Natural Resource Management Plan in 1995 that outlines efforts at conservation and preservation of the natural environment and its wildlife habitats. Key findings are as follows:



- BREC has worked to provide opportunities for citizens to voice their opinion about natural resource, cultural and historical resources through a Needs Assessment Survey and participation in the Horizon Plan;
- Citizens are supportive of conserving natural resources.
- Development of land is negatively impacting vegetative and animal habitats.
- The Parish has many outstanding natural features which are scenic and reservoirs for natural wildlife.
- Areas of archaeological significance are endangered by lack of conservation.
- The Parish has great ecological diversity, historically having three vegetation communities whereas, most Parishes in the State only have one or two.
- Habitat loss is the most significant cause of loss of species diversity.

#### **Our recommendations.....**

*To address issues of quality versus quantity, standards must be developed which define quality. Citizens gave some clues of their expectations of quality during the planning process which include:*

- Less use of the green pipe which surrounds most parks.
- Larger indoor recreation facilities with more family amenities rather than the smaller neighborhood centers.
- Development of some nice parks which are maintained at a very high level and which feature aesthetically pleasing passive areas with places to sit and shade; and, appropriate amenities which utilize high grade construction materials.



- Upgrading of specialty facilities with higher quality finishes and construction materials; and, nicely maintained and aesthetically pleasing exteriors.

***To address fiscal issues, BREC must find an approach which removes the current practice of seeking voter approval of operating funds.***

***To address indoor recreation issues, BREC must take a number of actions:***

- Construct three large modern facilities which can accommodate a number and variety of amenities which families are willing to support. Each facility should be approximately 75,000 sq. ft., or the average size of all three should be 75,000 sq. ft.
- Some existing recreation centers should be upgraded to provide close-to-home needs or unique program opportunities.
- Some existing recreation centers would be better utilized by other providers and hobbyists. These uses will close the gap on some of the excess capacity at these buildings which currently exists while providing other providers with the indoor space they need.

***To address the park system, a number of steps must be taken:***

- The term “quality” must be defined in cooperation with concerned citizens. Due to the emphasis placed on this issue during the planning process, it warrants further investigation. Examples of quality will surely include the paving and addition of curbs in parking lots, the elimination of the green pipe that surrounds most parks, selection of higher quality materials for construction, addition of floriculture in the parks, improved signage and park themeing.
- Safety and security is an issue which is of concern to park users. Consideration of some strategically placed lighting, surveillance cameras and use of park police should be considered.
- The level of maintenance and capital improvements must be improved to meet citizen expectations. Current per acre expenditure for maintenance of \$1700 is not enough. Level 1 park maintenance calls for \$6,000 per acre. BREC should allocate an additional 15% of its budget for upgrading its maintenance. An additional 15% for maintenance elevates the expenditure from \$1700 per acre to \$1955 per acre.
- The number of playgrounds must be decreased from its current level of 143. Strategically placed larger playgrounds need to be installed in approximately 12 locations throughout the Parish.
- Develop 12 community level parks to serve as destination attractions.
- Major parks and points of interest should be connected by a trail system, when possible.

***To address the cultural, historical and natural resource issues, BREC must implement the recommendations in the Horizon Plan and the 1995 Natural Resource Management Plan.***

***To improve the recreation program, a number of steps need to be taken:***

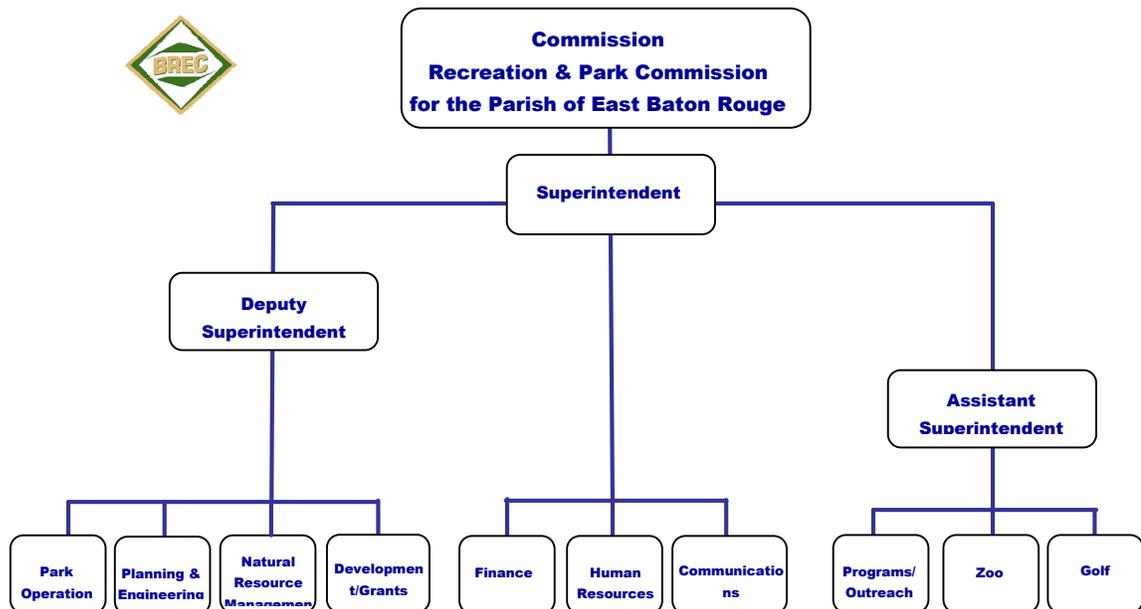
- Consolidate the Community Resources Department and Recreation Departments.
- Endorse and commit substantial resources to the core businesses of day camps, special events, adult and youth sports, senior programs, home school physical education and after school program, specialty facilities, and, youth and teen programs.
- Improve the program registration process by allowing for other ways to sign up for programs. Other methods include the use of credit card over the phone, e-mail, mail and fax.
- Realign the department to consolidate the six area supervisors into three.
- Develop performance measures which provide information that staff can manage with. Pertinent measures include the number of repeat customers, cost per experience, number of participants, percentage of new programs and percentage of old programs.
- Improve recreation centers as they are the arenas within which the programs occur. It is nearly impossible to have a successful program in a facility which does not lend itself to it.
- Increase the level of staff training and development.



Organizational issues which must be addressed to successfully implement the plan include:

- Restructure the organization per the consultant’s recommendation below by: a) reducing the number of staff reporting to the Superintendent; and, b) consolidation of the Community Resource and Recreation Departments to reduce duplicative efforts. See *New Organizational Chart*.

Figure Ex. Sum. 1: – New Organizational Chart



- Existing policies must be analyzed and new policies must be developed which provide BREC with an opportunity to successfully implement its Plan. Key findings in this report include various needs for: a) additional funding; b) new and improved partnering opportunities to leverage, utilize and protect limited resources; and, c) cost avoidance. Some examples include the following:
  - Cost recovery policy
  - A formal partnership agreement
  - Staff training and development
- Formalize partnerships which help BREC meet its goals. This report’s recommendations include changing the way BREC delivers youth sports by becoming a facilitator rather than a direct provider; by using excess capacity at recreation centers for other providers who are funded by the United Way and hobbyists; and by increasing the effort to preserve and protect the cultural, historical and natural resources. As a result of those recommendations, the recommended partnerships include:
  - Youth sports
  - United Way Agencies
  - Conservation Groups
  - Hobbyists



**Table Ex. Sum. 2: – Development and operating costs to upgrade existing facilities.....**

Item	Development Cost	Additional Operating Cost
Upgrade existing community parks	\$17.6M	\$705,100
Upgrade existing recreation centers	\$15M	\$450,000
Upgrade existing fishing areas	\$350K	0
Renovate existing pools	\$1.5M	0
Replace shade trees	\$1M	\$25,000
Neighborhood Parks renovation/improvements	\$4M	0
Upgrade special use facilities	\$11.9M	\$156,500
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$51.35M</b>	<b>\$1,336,600</b>

**Table Ex. Sum 3: – Development and operating costs to provide new facilities that citizens want.....**

Item	Development Cost	Additional Operating Cost
Trails	\$5.35M	\$160,500
Mega centers	\$29M	\$2,900,000
Aquatic facilities (splash pads)	\$1.8M	\$180,000
Aquatic Center with competitive lanes	\$9.8M	\$380,000
Cultural, historical and natural resource plan implementation	\$7.5M	\$75,000
Acquire/develop new fishing areas	\$1.0M	\$20,000
Acquire new park land	\$5M	0
Sports facilities	\$11.95M	\$717,000
New special use facilities	\$3M	\$90,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$74.4M</b>	<b>\$4,522,500</b>



### **Funding and operating possibilities.....**

As previously mentioned in this report, BREC must identify new revenue streams, guarantee its annual needs for operating funds, adopt new policies, realign its organization, formalize appropriate partnerships and scrutinize its current expenses (cost avoidance) to provide citizens with the level and quality of services they desire.

Recommended actions include:

### **Partnership Development**

BREC cannot be the sole provider for all services within the Parish. It can, however, work with others to facilitate the services that it cannot unilaterally provide. By identifying other appropriate partners, BREC can develop partnerships which offset some programs (and their costs) they are currently sponsoring; it can generate more revenue and improve public relations by allowing indoor uses in its centers by other providers such as the United Way Agencies and hobbyists; and, it can establish an environment in which new partners will surface who are excited about new ventures at BREC and desire to be a part of it.

### **Guarantee of Operating and Maintenance Funds**

BREC must find an option which guarantees the funding of its annual operating and maintenance needs. Voter approval should only be sought for capital projects.

### **Internal Revenue Generation**

User fees are expected to generate 25% of the general fund budget in 2004 which represents \$6.7M. It is not unusual for other communities to generate 50% of their budget from user fees, thus, it is likely there is room for additional revenue from this source. It does not have to affect those who are unable to pay as they can receive scholarships; however, many users can afford to pay and they should be given that opportunity.

BREC needs to target its resources toward its core functions. Cost recovery policies need to be factored into the core functions so that secondary functions have high rates of cost recovery and tertiary functions have total cost recovery, or more.

Existing recreation centers have excess capacity. Those facilities can be marketed for those in the private and/or public sector for rental.



### **BREC Foundation**

BREC has already established a Foundation which will be very helpful over the years as projects are developed. As BREC knows, citizens are more willing to contribute to a Foundation than a public agency.

### **Capital Improvement Tax**

New facilities cannot be constructed with existing BREC funds. A capital improvement tax is an option which citizens will have to support if they want new facilities.

### **Grants**

A number of federal, state and foundation grants are available. BREC has a Development and Grants Department which has received nearly \$2M in its first year and has nearly \$6M pending as of this time.

