

A message from THE SUPERINTENDENT



City-Brooks Community Park and the Baton Rouge We Want to Become

By Dr. Brooks Williams, BREC Superintendent
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I have been in Baton Rouge for a few weeks, which means I am still at the useful stage where I can ask why we do something a certain way and occasionally get an answer more informative than, “Because that is how we have always done it.” City-Brooks Community Park has given me plenty to ask about, and I arrived late enough in the process that I did not inherit a side, which may be one of the better advantages I have right now.

I have spent the last several weeks reading, listening, asking questions, reviewing plans and survey results, and trying to understand why people who care deeply about the same public property have reached such different conclusions about its future.

The more I have learned, the less interested I have become in deciding which group is right and the more interested I have become in understanding what each group is right about.

People advocating for substantial change believe City-Brooks Community Park should offer more opportunities for families, younger residents, recreation, connection, and community, while golfers look at a public course that people continue to use and reasonably ask why reducing or removing it became synonymous with progress. Nearby residents are thinking about traffic, safety, access, noise, and what major changes could mean outside their front doors, while residents elsewhere in East Baton Rouge Parish may never visit City-Brooks Community Park and still have every reason to ask why one park is receiving this much attention when BREC has 170+ sites to operate and maintain.

Those concerns do not cancel each other out, and that is usually the inconvenient part of public administration

because most difficult public decisions are not a contest between one side with common sense and another that somehow misplaced theirs.

I have spent years working in the field of public administration and teaching it, and experience has made me suspicious of any public issue that becomes too easy to explain. Once every problem has been reduced to two camps, every statistic proves the same thing, and everybody knows exactly who is preventing progress...there is a decent chance we have stopped examining the problem and started defending positions.

As the new Superintendent, I do not need to defend a position I did not develop. I need to understand how we got here, what people told us, who we did not hear from, what the information supports, what it does not support, what the options cost, and how City-Brooks Community Park fits within the responsibilities we have throughout East Baton Rouge Parish.

That begins with a fairly simple question...“What are we trying to fix?”

If City-Brooks Community Park can serve more people, we should figure out how. If the park is poorly connected, fix the connections. If families need more recreation, find out what they will use. If golf occupies more land than its public benefit justifies, then the information should show us that and we should be willing to change it. If golf continues to provide enough public benefit to justify its presence, we should be equally willing to say that. If our engagement failed to reach parts of this parish, we should stop defending the engagement and go reach them.

Those are decisions we can influence through a well thought out plan. The argument gets considerably harder to prove when City-Brooks Community Park becomes evidence that the Greater Baton Rouge area ignores younger people,

refuses to change, or is driving educated residents out of Louisiana.

Some younger advocates clearly feel unheard, and that deserves for us to give it particular attention and improve. Yes, someone can participate in a process, watch the recommendation develop differently than expected, and reasonably question whether their input affected the outcome, but that is a different question from whether younger people were missing from the process.

The first City-Brooks Community Park survey received 1,084 responses plus 120 mapping submissions, and its demographic review found that respondents skewed younger than the population used for comparison. Adults ages 25 through 34 represented roughly 20% of respondents compared with about 14% of the comparison population, while those ages 35 through 44 represented about 26% compared with approximately 11%. Adults ages 18 through 24 were underrepresented, and we should improve our outreach to them, but the broad claim that younger adults were shut out is not supported by the participation data.

The responses from younger adults create an even bigger problem for the idea that there is one identifiable thing called “what young people want.” Among respondents ages 25 through 34, 31% wanted golf kept, 32% wanted the golf area adjusted for additional uses, and 21% wanted golf maintained while adding other uses where possible. Among those ages 35 through 44, the results were 30%, 34%, and 20%.

A 27-year-old LSU graduate student, a 34-year-old parent, a 39-year-old teacher, and a 44-year-old-business owner may all fit within somebody’s definition of a younger professional, but they generally do not have the same income, responsibilities, neighborhood, children, schedule, or idea of how they want to spend a Saturday. Treating them as though age gives us the rest of that information is not engagement, it is assumption.

There is a much clearer participation problem in the survey, and I think BREC should own it. About 85% of respondents identified as White and only 7% as Black, while 43% reported household incomes above \$150,000. The same survey showed that 89% of respondents were nearby residents or regular park visitors, 96% had already visited City-Brooks Community Park, and 80% visited monthly or more.

Those numbers tell us that we heard especially well from people who already knew City-Brooks Community Park, already used it, lived nearby, or had enough interest in the property to participate. That is useful information if we want to understand current users, but it gives us much less confidence about what the resident farther from the park

thinks, what will make someone who never comes here start coming, or whether a family living much closer to the parish median income sees this project the same way.

If we are going to say this park should serve East Baton Rouge Parish, then our outreach needs to look more like East Baton Rouge Parish. We should have recognized that earlier, not simply counted responses and assumed volume solved representation. That is something we could have done better.

We also need to pay attention to the people who did not participate, because silence is information when we understand what it can tell us.

The June public meeting was scheduled from 5:30 to 7 p.m. For some people, that works. For someone getting off work at 5, sitting in Baton Rouge traffic, picking up children, figuring out dinner, or starting another shift, it may as well have been scheduled for 3 in the morning.

If people could not participate because of timing, then we need different times. If they did not know about the process, our communication was inadequate. If certain communities did not see themselves in the discussion, we need to go to them. If they do not trust that public input changes anything, we need to show specifically where it did.

There is another possibility that I believe we have to be mature enough to consider. And that is...some people may simply not care very much about City-Brooks Community Park compared with the other things happening in their lives.

Public meetings naturally collect people with stronger opinions. A person willing to spend two hours at a meeting or complete a detailed survey has already demonstrated more interest than the person who does neither. That does not make the participant’s opinion less important, but it does mean we cannot automatically treat the intensity of the people who participated as the intensity of the entire parish.

Silence tells us where our information ends. It does not allow me, a consultant, an advocacy organization, a younger professional group, or anyone else to finish the sentence for the person who never spoke. That becomes especially important when this park gets connected to Louisiana’s difficulty retaining talent.

I believe great parks improve communities. They provide recreation, improve health, connect people, create places



families remember, strengthen neighborhoods, and contribute to whether someone enjoys living in a place. BREC should be very good at doing those things.

When you consider the Baton Rouge metropolitan area had an average hourly wage of \$29.44 in May 2025 compared with \$33.54 nationally, you can begin to see the complexity of “quality of life”. The gap is much larger in some of the occupations we frequently associate with the professionals cities compete to attract and retain. Business and financial occupations averaged \$37.32 an hour here compared with \$45.78 nationally, while computer and mathematical occupations averaged \$41.09 compared with \$57.73 nationally.

The importance of those numbers is not the exercise of subtraction. Imagine the person Baton Rouge says it wants to retain. She earns a degree, starts a career here, perhaps marries, has children, and then receives an offer in another metropolitan area. The question in the kitchen that evening is not whether the area has enough amenities. It is whether staying here gives the household the future it wants.

Can both spouses advance professionally? Can they save for retirement and college? Can they afford the house they want without becoming house poor? Can they deal with an insurance increase without cancelling something else? Does staying here limit the next promotion or salary increase?

If we look at Houston, it provides a useful nearby comparison. Its overall hourly wage averaged \$32.51 in May 2025 compared with Baton Rouge at \$29.44. Business and financial occupations averaged \$44.04 there compared with \$37.32 here, while computer and mathematical occupations averaged \$52.79 in Houston compared with \$41.09 in Baton Rouge.

For a household deciding between Baton Rouge and Houston, that is not an abstract national comparison. Houston is a few hours away, family and professional connections between the two places are common, and a salary difference repeated year after year can change what a household saves, what it can buy, and what opportunities become available later.

That is why parks and quality of life can contribute to talent retention without explaining talent loss. If Baton Rouge cannot always win on salary, then affordability, family, culture, food, public spaces, commute, schools, recreation, and belonging become more important reasons to stay. City-Brooks Community Park can improve Baton Rouge in that competition, but it cannot make a \$41 an hour job pay \$53.

Schools affect the same household decision, and East Baton Rouge Parish Schools deserve credit for the progress they

have made. The district reached its highest performance score and graduation rate, while Louisiana as a whole improved for a fourth consecutive year and reached a statewide performance score of 80.9.

For a parent, however, the question is not limited to whether the school system is better than it was five years ago. They may also compare it with Lafayette Parish at 87.5, Livingston Parish at 92.7, or another district available if a job or home search takes them somewhere else. The progress in East Baton Rouge is important, and so is the competition facing a family deciding where children will spend the next decade.

Baton Rouge has also made substantial progress on crime. In 2025, overall crime fell about 15%, violent crime about 8%, robberies about 21%, property crime about 17%, shootings about 18%, and parish homicides about 18%.

Those numbers should be recognized because improvement should count when we evaluate a community. Families and employers, however, do not compare Baton Rouge only with an earlier version of Baton Rouge, they compare it with the other places where they could live or invest. Shreveport reported 42 homicides in 2025, down from 52, New Orleans continued a multiyear decline, and Lafayette reported a 44% reduction in homicides along with decreases across major crime categories. These places have different populations, boundaries, and reporting methods, so raw totals are not a useful scoreboard, but the broader point is important, and that is Baton Rouge is improving while other communities are improving too.

Competition does not stop because we got better. Housing, jobs, income, schools, safety, family, culture, recreation, and amenities combine into a decision that changes as people move through life. National Census data show housing related reasons accounted for 41.6% of moves in 2022, while family reasons accounted for another 26.5%. Research on highly skilled workers finds amenities can matter more earlier in adulthood, while affordability and family considerations become more influential as people move through their thirties and forties, particularly after having children.

At age 26, the list may include restaurants, trails, nightlife, culture, interesting public spaces, and whether there are enough things to do. At age 38, those things can still be important, but the list probably got longer and now includes school pickup, childcare, a mortgage, two careers, health insurance, aging parents, and whether everybody can get where they need to be on a Tuesday morning without the household operating like Baton Rouge traffic management after an LSU home game.

Baton Rouge should learn from places that have attracted residents, businesses, and investment, and I think we



should be perfectly willing to borrow a good idea from any city careless enough to leave it lying around. What we should not do is copy visible amenities and assume we have copied the conditions that created those cities. If you look at cities like Austin and Nashville, they grew through universities, employment, industries, housing, investment, transportation, migration, culture, and decades of public and private decisions that reinforced one another. Their parks improve those cities, but their parks did not create their economies.

From the feedback I have received, I have also been told that Baton Rouge does not need to become Austin or Nashville. The more useful question is what version of Baton Rouge makes sense for the people who live here, the people we hope will stay, and the people we hope will choose this community in the future.

City-Brooks Community Park can be part of that, but before we start talking about everything we want to build, I believe the public is entitled to ask how we intend to pay for it.

Public estimates have moved considerably as concepts have changed. In July, BREC discussed a range of roughly \$30 million to \$50 million depending on the option selected. More recent estimates have put the full City-Brooks Community Park project above \$100 million with implementation potentially stretching over more than a decade. Separately, the Contemporary Arts Center planned at City-Brooks Community Park carries an estimated construction cost of approximately \$20 million after the Commission previously approved up to \$1.3 million for design and construction documents.

If someone looks at those figures and asks where the money is coming from, I do not believe that person is not anti-park, anti-progress, or lacking imagination. A master plan does not fund itself. Some improvements may eventually be supported through grants, philanthropy, partnerships, dedicated capital funding, or future budgets, while others may never receive funding at all. We need to be clearer about the difference between an idea shown in a plan, a project adopted for future development, a project with an identified funding source, and something we are preparing to build.

That explanation becomes even more important because City-Brooks Community Park is not our only responsibility. BREC operates 170+ sites throughout East Baton Rouge Parish. City-Brooks Community Park is a significant property beside LSU and the University Lakes with history, cultural facilities, recreation, and tremendous potential. It deserves serious investment, but a parent somewhere else in the parish whose playground is broken, field needs work, restroom is closed, or neighborhood park needs attention

has every right to ask how a nine-figure vision at City-Brooks Community Park fits with what they see outside their own front door.

The public feedback suggests there may be more room to do that than the current debate sometimes allows. Respondents asked for stronger walking and biking connections, safer crossings, family recreation, shade, water access, activity, and better use of the park, while substantial numbers also wanted golf to remain in some form.

People are capable of wanting both. They can want the golf course changed without wanting it eliminated, want an adventure playground without believing every other use should move out of its way, want more activity and still value quiet spaces, and want City-Brooks Community Park transformed while also asking what transformation costs.

I do not believe golf should remain simply because it has been there since 1926, although its history and continued use deserve consideration. I also do not believe a new amenity deserves land simply because it is “new”. The same questions should apply to both...Who uses it, who would use it, what public purpose does it serve, what does it cost to build and operate, what has to change to accommodate it, what can coexist with it, and can we maintain it twenty years from now?

The fact that the golf course was built in 1926 does not settle its future, and neither does a rendering produced in 2026.

We also need to own where BREC could have done better because defending every earlier decision would accomplish very little for the park. We should have examined the demographic gaps in participation earlier, broadened outreach sooner, reached farther beyond existing City-Brooks Community Park users, explained funding more clearly, and done a better job distinguishing concepts from commitments.

We also need to stop assigning motives to people simply because they disagree with us. Younger residents who want something different at City-Brooks Community Park are not entitled or naïve. Golfers who want to preserve a course they use are not automatically opposed to progress. Nearby residents who worry about traffic and neighborhood effects are not selfish, and someone across the parish questioning the amount of money being discussed is not against investment.

Most of them are asking some version of the same question... Can we make this better without being stupid about it? I think we can.

City-Brooks Community Park can connect better to LSU and the lakes, make walking and biking safer, provide more



opportunities for families, create new recreation, improve underused areas, and preserve existing uses where the public benefit justifies them. It can become a better park and contribute to a better Baton Rouge.

I also think there is a larger opportunity here, and this is where I do not want us to think too small. City-Brooks Community Park cannot singularly fix wages, schools, crime, housing, insurance, infrastructure, or every reason someone decides to leave Louisiana, but the way we handle City-Brooks Community Park can say something about what kind of public institution BREC intends to be.

We can admit where our process was weaker than it should have been and fix it. We can measure who participated rather than simply celebrate how many responses we received. We can go back when the numbers tell us entire parts of the parish are missing. We can explain what something costs before allowing a conceptual drawing to begin looking like a funded project, and we can evaluate an existing use and a new idea with the same questions instead of deciding one represents the past and the other automatically represents the future.

More importantly, we can decide ahead of time how we will know whether any of this worked.

If we say a new investment will bring more people to City-Brooks Community Park, then count them, and prove it! If we say it will serve more of the parish, determine where users are coming from before and after the investment. If an improvement is supposed to make the park easier to reach, measure whether access improved. If we promise that BREC can maintain what we build, then report the condition of those facilities five and ten years later instead of declaring success on opening day. If public input changes the plan, show people what changed and why. If it does not change the plan, explain that too.

Government is very comfortable measuring what it spends. We are not always as good at measuring what the public received for it. BREC has an opportunity to become better at that.

I am not going to tell East Baton Rouge Parish Schools how to run schools, our law enforcement agencies how to police, or any of the municipalities in this parish how to govern. I have 170+ park sites to worry about, which should keep me sufficiently occupied.

But imagine if more of our public institutions routinely asked the same questions of themselves. Who are we serving? Who are we missing? What result did we promise? Did we achieve it? What did it cost? What needs to change? Where are we better than we were, and where are other

communities improving faster than we are? This is not criticism of the people doing the work, but I do believe it is how organizations improve.

East Baton Rouge Parish Schools can celebrate its highest performance score and still ask why other districts score higher. Law enforcement can recognize substantial reductions in crime while continuing to ask how Baton Rouge compares with communities competing for the same families and businesses. BREC can be proud of nationally recognized facilities and still ask whether every neighborhood experiences the quality of park system we say we operate. Progress and self-examination belong together. That may be one of the most important things we can demonstrate through City-Brooks Community Park.

We can listen without promising everyone their preferred outcome. We can change without assuming everything old is wrong. We can respect history without allowing history to make every decision for us. We can pursue something ambitious while demanding to know how it will be paid for, and we can acknowledge a mistake without treating the admission as some institutional crisis. None of that is particularly revolutionary, although government occasionally behaves as if it is.

City-Brooks Community Park gives us an opportunity to prove that, not by declaring one side the winner, not by pretending one park will solve every challenge facing Baton Rouge, and not by defending every decision that got us here.

If we do that, City-Brooks Community Park becomes more than a better park.

It becomes an example of what happens when a public institution is willing to judge itself by what it produces rather than what it intended, and willing to improve without first requiring someone else to be wrong.

That is a version of boldness worthy of East Baton Rouge Parish, and BREC has an opportunity to demonstrate it by starting with ourselves.

