A MESSAGE FROM

THE SUPERINTENDENT

We Owe Baton Rouge More Than Another Argument.

By Dr. Brooks Williams, BREC Superintendent
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In my first few months in East Baton Rouge Parish, I've heard people describe in wonderful detail what they'd like this place to become. I enjoy how somebody can tell me what they love about Baton Rouge and, without stopping for breath, tell me what around here has needed fixing for years. When you've made a life somewhere, you know what made you stay, and you'd like your children to have reasons of their own.

Sometimes the person who's just spent ten minutes getting me excited about what we could do here will say, "Of course, I can already tell you who's going to have a problem with that." I wish the neighbor we're talking about could've heard those first ten minutes, too. They might want some of the same things. And if they do think I'm wrong, I'd like to hear why. Some of the friends I trust most will tell me that to my face, and I'd hate to think you have to be a friend of mine before you feel free to do the same. Yet there we sit, deciding whether to give up on an idea we liked five minutes ago or figure out how to push it through over an objection nobody's actually made. That's an awful lot of trouble to go to when somebody in the room probably has that neighbor's phone number.

What worries me is how easily "somebody will object" becomes "that's just Baton Rouge." We can picture an idea working in Atlanta or Nashville, then give you twenty years of reasons it could never work here. Some of that skepticism came honestly. People remember who promised what, how long they waited and whether anybody ever came back. In fact, the person who remembers why the last effort failed may know exactly what it would take for the next one to succeed. But when the person predicting disappointment is always the one who sounds wise, what do our children hear? I'd hate for one of mine to get the idea, from listening to adults who love this city, that the first step toward doing something worthwhile is leaving it.

When BREC offered me this job, my wife, Virginia, and I had seven lives to consider. We could tell our five children all the reasons Baton Rouge felt right to us, but they were the ones who had to say goodbye to friends, walk into new schools and find somebody to sit with at lunch. You'd better believe in a place before you ask that much of your kids. Virginia and I do. We chose Baton Rouge for the years when all five are under our roof and for the years when it's just the two of us again. Someday somebody else will have my job, and this will still be home.

I want our children to know what they have here. Follow the Mississippi from Southern University on the Bluff down to LSU and you'll pass the State Capitol along the way. Think about how many people have come to that one stretch of river to get an education, teach somebody else or have a say in the future of Louisiana. We can admire what people have accomplished in Dallas or Austin and have ambitions of our own. I'd gladly borrow a good idea from any city in the country. I'd also like us to do work good enough that somebody in one of those cities picks up the phone and says, "Call Baton Rouge. I want to know how they did it."

I see no reason to grade the place we love on a curve.

Loving Baton Rouge also means being honest about whose memories we're talking about when we say how good things used to be. There are Black grandparents in this parish who remember being turned away from public places where white families spent some of their happiest days. One grandparent may hope to give a child the same childhood they had here. Another may have spent a lifetime making sure their grandchild could have a different one. I want to hear from the person who knows what it took to build something worth keeping and from the person who knows what it cost to leave things the way they were. Both have something to teach us about the parish their grandchildren will share.

At BREC, I have a responsibility to give you reasons to expect more. A family arriving for the first game on Saturday should find the field ready to play. If we tell you we'll repair something by Friday, you should be able to go by on Friday and see the work.

A few years from now, I'd like to be able to tell you about a much bigger undertaking and have you believe we can pull it off. A good bit of that depends on what you find when you go by on Friday.

BREC can also do more with what this parish has already put in our hands. I can call a school superintendent, a mayor or somebody who's kept a community organization going for twenty years and ask, "What are you trying to get done, and is there something BREC has that would help?" We have land, buildings and people who know how to put them to use. Somebody who's been looking for a place to put a good idea to work may have just as much to offer us as we have to offer them. I'd like BREC to make that first call often enough that, the next time one of those folks has an idea, they think to call us while they're still figuring it out.

And when the idea happens to be mine, you should have the same chance to improve it. If I'm going to ask what you think, I'd better be prepared for the possibility that you've got a better idea. You may know something about this place that I could spend the next ten years here and never learn unless you tell me. I'd ask you to extend that same courtesy to the neighbor who's spent those ten years hoping something would change. I want to know what each of you has lived with before I decide what I'm going to ask either of you to live with next.

We may understand each other perfectly well by then and still disagree. I can live with that. If I'm asking you to give up something that's served your family well, I should be able to tell you what I believe will be better and why it's worth what I'm asking of you. Maybe you'll show me that the part you want to keep was never what stood in the way. I'd be a fool to insist on changing it just because it was in my proposal. And if I'm the one who likes things the way they are, I need to hear from the family that's had good reason for years to want something better. I may come away convinced we should leave it alone, change it, or do something neither of us thought of until we talked.

Where I draw the line is when getting what matters to you is no longer enough because you've decided the people who disagreed with you should go home empty-handed. You can make a good case for keeping something you love. You can make an equally good case that a change is long overdue. I'll hear you out either way, and what you tell me may well change what I do. But if the price of your support is that your neighbor gets nothing, I'll do the work without your support. I still work for both of you.

I hope our grandchildren grow up loving something about Baton Rouge that doesn't exist yet. I'd get a kick out of hearing one of them tell me a place has always been there when I can still remember how close we came to talking ourselves out of building it. By then, I hope the kids are such regulars that it would never occur to any of them to wonder whose grandparents were for it. They'll just know it's theirs.

When Virginia and I sent our five kids into new schools here, we were counting on children we'd never met to make room at the lunch table for ours. For all I know, the neighbor who disagrees with me most is raising exactly the kid I hoped one of mine would sit beside. When that parent and I find ourselves in the same room, I want to be the one who pulls up a chair and says, "Come sit with us."

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