

A message from **THE SUPERINTENDENT**



A Community of Excellence for All of East Baton Rouge Parish

By Dr. Brooks Williams, BREC Superintendent
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Tell people you intend to make government work better and you can usually get a round of applause. Start explaining what might have to change, though, and you may discover that the way we were doing it yesterday has become a cherished tradition overnight. We have families paying for a better community, employees working to provide it, and institutions making decisions that are supposed to improve life here. The people paying for all of that deserve to see it working.

BREC will lead the way toward a community of excellence across all of East Baton Rouge Parish, beginning with the standard we set for ourselves. I mean Baton Rouge, Baker, Central, Zachary, St. George, and our unincorporated communities, because a parish-wide organization has a responsibility to consider the whole parish, including families whose needs may be very different from those who speak most often or have the easiest access to what we provide.



Consider the photograph I took along Nicholson. It helps explain why this reaches beyond BREC and into how we think about the whole community. A neatly mowed strip runs up the middle, between two areas that had not been cut. The maintenance responsibilities, as they were explained to me, belong to three different organizations. The pipeline company maintains the

middle strip, the City-Parish maintains the strip beside the road, and the railroad maintains the adjoining area. In the photograph, the pipeline's portion had been mowed while the other two had not. People driving past see one stretch

of Nicholson, while the responsibility for caring for it is divided among 3 organizations.

There may be legitimate reasons for different crews and schedules, and one photograph is hardly a complete review of anybody's maintenance operation. But looking at it, I wondered whether a conversation among those organizations might reveal a better way to care for the whole stretch. Knowing which section belongs to whom would give them a place to begin, with an understanding of what each could contribute and what obligations would have to be respected.

Perhaps one crew could maintain the stretch, with each organization contributing its share, or perhaps the existing crews could coordinate their work more closely. Someone familiar with that work may have a better idea than either of those, which is a good reason to ask. We would need to see whether a different arrangement improved the result at a sensible cost. But the willingness to consider another way could carry us well beyond a strip of grass on Nicholson. We can agree that something could be better without deciding in advance what the answer has to be.

That is how we begin to get past silo thinking, which takes hold in organizations and communities everywhere. Good people can work hard on their portion of a job while a problem that crosses several responsibilities remains unresolved. Each organization has an explanation, but the community still has the problem. BREC is going to confront that thinking within BREC, and we will ask our partners to join us in looking beyond the boundaries of their own assignments.

An old criticism of BREC asks why a system with so many parks and facilities does not take better care of them. That is a legitimate question. Every additional facility brings expenses that continue long after the opening celebration. We are examining each location's condition, the people

and needs it serves, the repairs it requires, and the cost of keeping it operating. If a national ranking or gold medal could cool a recreation center in August, we could save a fortune on air conditioning, but until that technology arrives, we will have to judge the service by what people experience when they get there.

We all want change until we are asked to accept some of it ourselves. It is easy to look at that grass on Nicholson and imagine how those organizations could work together. But suggest that our own agency share equipment with another organization or adjust its schedule to make a joint effort work, and suddenly we can produce a remarkably detailed explanation of why the old arrangement should remain. The same thing happens when a proposed change reaches a program we use or a place we love. We want better service and wiser spending, but if getting there requires us to do something differently or give up some control, our enthusiasm can cool considerably. Apparently, change is a wonderful idea as long as it has somebody else's address.

Meanwhile, the taxpayer keeps paying for the way we have chosen to do things. Our public organizations may have separate budgets, but the family contributing to them does not get a separate paycheck for each one. If 2 agencies buy equipment they could responsibly share, that family helps pay for both purchases. If we build something without working with the people responsible for making it accessible, the family pays for an improvement it may struggle to use. Each organization can explain its decision, defend its budget, and report that it did its job, while the people paying for the whole thing are still waiting for their community to get better. That is why we have to look beyond what makes sense inside our own offices.

Changing that mindset means changing where we begin. Before BREC decides it needs another building, we should ask whether suitable space already exists and whether an agreement could make it available. Before organizations make separate plans for adjoining properties, they should sit down together and consider how people will use the whole place. We still have to work through costs, responsibilities, and access. But we will never discover what is possible if protecting the familiar arrangement is the price of being allowed into the conversation.

BREC has no business asking others to reconsider something important to them while we refuse to reconsider something comfortable for us.

At BREC, we are examining how recreation and maintenance employees can operate as one park team, responsible for the condition and operation of the entire location. If a recreation employee identifies a problem, the team would arrange the repair, assign responsibility for it, establish when it should be completed, and check that it was done properly. If the repair affects a program, the team would work out a schedule that allows both to happen instead of leaving separate departments to resolve the conflict after it disrupts visitors. People should be able to tell that the park is being cared for without needing to see our organizational chart.

We also need to reconsider how we use the parks and facilities we already have. A room used by one group in the morning might serve another in the evening, and a park's familiar use may be only part of what it could offer. We need to ask whether our hours work for the people we hope to reach, whether the activities reflect what residents want today, and whether we have overlooked other ways to use the space.

The taxpayer has already invested in these places, and we should be willing to consider what else that investment could make possible. A place that matters to this community deserves the chance to serve it in new ways as the needs of the people around it change.

We will bring that same thinking to our work with public agencies, schools, LSU, businesses, and community organizations across East Baton Rouge Parish. A school's available space might serve a recreation program if an agreement addresses access, supervision, schedules, and upkeep. A park improvement might become far more useful if the people responsible for the road and walking route participate in making it reachable. These are possibilities to examine together. I am not asking anyone to accept an answer in advance, but we do have to be willing to discuss what we could accomplish together before deciding what each of us will build or buy alone.

Residents need to help us establish what would make life better, and the organizations involved need to agree on the work, the costs, and who is responsible for getting it done. Moving an expense from one public agency to another does not necessarily save the taxpayer anything. Private partners have their own obligations, so their participation also requires a fair agreement about what they contribute and receive. A signed agreement will not mow the grass or open a building. We have to carry out the work, check the result,



and correct what is not working. Where cooperation proves more expensive or less effective, we need to admit it and choose another approach.

At BREC, we will make our progress visible by showing the conditions we identified, the work needed to correct them, who is responsible, and whether the work was completed and verified. A completed work order is of very little use to a family if the restroom still does not work, so the standard has to be the condition people encounter when they arrive. We will also explain the cost of a proposed change and what improvement people should expect, then compare the result with that expectation. Residents should be able to judge whether service improved and resources were used responsibly without having to accept our assurance that everything is going wonderfully.

I understand why people become protective of a place where their children learned to swim, their parents found friends, or their family spent Saturdays together. An operating budget will never describe all of that, and a proposal that lowers our expenses while making a service much harder to reach can be cheaper and still be worse. Residents deserve an explanation of what would change, who could lose access, and whether another arrangement could preserve the benefit they value. They also deserve honesty when defending the current arrangement would allow that place to keep deteriorating. We need to care enough about these places to examine what it will take to keep them useful for the next family.

I am asking the public to be as open to considering change as we are committed to defending what has been. People should bring their concerns, especially when a proposal could affect something important in their lives. Those concerns can help us make a better decision.

But we also have to be willing to hear why a change is being proposed and consider what it could make possible, rather than treating the fact that it is different as reason enough to oppose it. BREC owes residents that same openness when they challenge how we do things.

Much of what we are determined to protect today began when somebody proposed doing something differently. The familiar park, the established program, the arrangement we now regard as permanent...somebody once had to suggest it, explain it, and persuade others to give it a chance. Some of those proposals likely faced the same doubts we hear today. What has been was once somebody's idea for what could be. We do not have to accept every new proposal, but we should give it the hearing that allowed so much of what we value to exist in the first place.

I want our children to have good reasons to stay in East Baton Rouge Parish and good reasons to come home if they leave. That will require more from us than individually defending our institutions while hoping somebody else improves the community around them. We can agree that we deserve better without arriving with every answer predetermined, but we do have to arrive prepared to reconsider our own practices and accept the inconvenience that improvement can require.

BREC is going to change, improve, and evolve, and we are going to set the standard and lead the way. We will begin with our own habits and decisions, even when changing them is painful, and I am asking our partners across all of East Baton Rouge Parish to bring that same willingness.

A community of excellence will require us to accept that a better way may ask something of us personally.

I am asking you to give us some benefit of the doubt and enough latitude to try a better way, then judge us by whether your community is improving and your money is being used responsibly. We will explain what we are doing, listen to what we have missed, and make adjustments when they are needed. Progress is never easy, but it is necessary. We are going to lead the way, and I hope you will join us.

