

DDD COMMISSION MEETING, MINUTES

April 7, 2026

Old Governor's Mansion, 502 North Boulevard

Board Members in Attendance: Patrick Michaels - Chairman, Joshua Hollins–Treasurer, Gary Black – Secretary, Eric Dexter, Susan Turner, and Gary Jupiter

Absentees: Philip Jordan–Vice Chairman

Others in Attendance: Whitney Hoffman Sayal, Casey Tate, Iboro Udoh, Schuyler Olson, Mark Martin, Jordan Arceneaux, Suzette Crocker, Zafer “Z” Goncu, Ianne Solavosa, Jasmine Thomas, John Snow, Elizabeth Dent Sumrall, Jason Crain, Tim NesSmith, Gregory Williams, Sherri LaBas, Dr. Sinella Aghasi, Yolandre McCray, Amanda Lanata, Dominick Blanda, Anna Mayes, Brad Watts, Brandie Bordelon, Rannah Gray, Stephanie Morgan, Rob Miller, Luke St. John McKnight, Charles Daniel, Reginal Brumfield, Alysia Guin, Thomasina Joseph, Paul Groves, Brittany Marshall

Patrick Michaels called the meeting to order and declared a quorum.

Whitney Hoffman Sayal welcomed everyone to the DDD Commission meeting and thanked our host and breakfast sponsor, Dr. Sinella Aghasi, Executive Director of the Old Governor's Mansion. Dr. Aghasi welcomed everyone to the historic Old Governor's Mansion, established in 1929 and approaching its 100th anniversary. Although the building has a long history, the current staff is relatively new and focused on increasing the Mansion's visibility and presence in the community. Although the Mansion is often viewed as an event venue, it primarily identifies as a house museum. Over the past year, there have been several exhibit changes, including the removal of three permanent exhibits and the recent installation of a new temporary exhibit, which was completed the day before the meeting. Attendees were invited to tour the facility following the meeting, with staff available to provide guided tours.

The curator provided additional information about a temporary traveling exhibit connected to the American 250 celebration. The exhibit explores themes of segregation, civil rights, and collective memory, featuring photographs from across the state. It is currently installed in the office hallway and includes a QR code that allows visitors to access additional information and engage more fully with the content.

1. Board Action:

- **Plan BRIII:** Whitney Hoffman Sayal stated that a special DDD Commission meeting for Plan Baton Rouge III is scheduled for May 12, provided the board approves. Patrick Michaels called for a motion to approve the special meeting for May 12; A motion was made by Susan Turner and seconded by Gary Jupiter; with no opposition, it was approved.
2. Joshua Hollins made a motion to approve the agenda. Susan Turner seconded, and the motion was approved.
 3. Eric Dexter made a motion to approve the minutes from the February 10, 2026, meeting. Gary Jupiter seconded, and the motion was approved.

4. Governmental Issues:

- **River Center Oversight Committee Update** – Whitney Hoffman updated the Commission. A River Center Project Oversight Committee meeting was held on March 11, where Hunden Partners presented findings from ongoing stakeholder engagement. They reported broad feedback emphasizing the need for a future headquarters hotel and stronger integration between the hotel, the River Center, and the ballroom spaces. Additional discussion focused on potential changes or repurposing of the arena, as well as overall renovation needs for the River Center, including interior and exterior improvements and updates to the mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and stormwater systems. Market conditions, particularly high hotel pricing, were also noted as a factor influencing planning decisions. Parking availability was generally considered sufficient within existing garages. The next phase of the project will involve using stakeholder input and facility assessments to develop cost estimates, feasibility analysis, and financing strategies, with further discussion needed on how any redevelopment would ultimately be funded.
- **Historic Preservation Commission:** Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission on the Historic Preservation Commission items impacting downtown.
 - HPC-2-26, 438 & 442 Main Street, Demolition by neglect - Deferral
 - HPC-3-26 645 8th Street, Restoration
 - 764 Spanish Town Road - Demolition by neglect - Deferral
 - 631 Lakeland Drive – Demolition by neglect - Deferral
 - 645 North 8th Street – Demolition by neglect -Deferral
- **St. James Street, France Street, Europe Street** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission on the street revocations around the Bally’s Casino. The street revocations were approved by the Planning Commission at the end of February and were afterwards approved by the Metro Council in March.
- **DDD Tax Millage**– Whitney Hoffman Sayal briefed the Commission. The Metro Council approved the DDD tax millage to levy the DDD tax at a rate of 9.5 mills for the 2026 tax year.
- **House Bill 213** - Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission. The DDD’s enabling legislation is being updated through House Bill 213. Created in 1984, the statute has only been minimally revised since then. House Bill 214, sponsored by Representative Terry Landry, updates the legislation to better align with updated bylaws and improve operational flexibility and efficiency. It has passed the House and is now moving through the Senate process toward final approval. Whitney thanked Eric Dexter and Josh Hollins for their assistance in updating this in line with our bylaws.

5. Development Initiatives:

- **DDD Houston Exchange** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal reported that the DDD participated in a brief exchange visit to Houston, where the staff met with Downtown Houston Plus and learned about their organizational structure and placemaking efforts. The visit included tours of major redevelopment projects such as “The Post,” a former post office converted into a mixed-use food and cultural venue through adaptive reuse, and Buffalo Bayou Park, a downtown greenway built around existing drainage infrastructure. Overall, the trip provided examples of successful large-scale redevelopment and offered insights relevant to similar local initiatives.
- **Houston Business Journal: Louisiana Takeover** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal briefed the Commission. The Houston Business Journal published a special Louisiana takeover edition, and the DDD was honored to contribute an article alongside Jill Kidder from Visit Baton Rouge, John Snow from Emergent Method, and Mike Wampold. The piece highlighted the progress and success downtown Baton Rouge has achieved, as

well as expectations for continued growth and development. Overall, the March Houston Business Journal was a “Louisiana Takeover” edition, and we were pleased to be featured and to gain increased visibility there.

- **Vehicular Wayfinding and Historic Signage, Phase 1** – Iboro Udoh updated the Commission on Phase One of the vehicular and historic wayfinding project. All Star Signs is the contractor for installing and refurbishing the signage throughout downtown. Approximately 40 vehicular wayfinding signs exist in total; however, some were previously damaged or knocked down due to traffic incidents. As part of Phase One, nine signs have been installed or restored in key downtown locations, with priority placement including River Road. Additional signs are being held by the Department of Maintenance for future reinstallation and refurbishment, including updates to worn, faded, or damaged components. Historic neighborhood signs in Spanish Town and Beauregard Town were also restored, including repainting posts and replacing faded panels.

- **Emergent Method Relocation** – John Snow, Partner Emergent Method, provided an overview of the firm, a management consulting company specializing in strategic planning, organizational planning, communications, technology system implementation, and program administration. Founded in 2012 with two employees working remotely, the firm has had several downtown locations accommodating their growth.

The company expanded from a small office on 3rd Street to a larger space above Azteca’s in 2015, and later to 200 Laurel Street in 2017, where it initially occupied the second floor before taking over additional space on the first floor. As the firm grew to nearly 200 employees, it outgrew its existing offices and sought a larger, more collaborative environment.

Emergent Method recently purchased and moved into the Creative Block Building, a renovated 11,000-square-foot facility, where it has been operating since January. The space supports daily operations for Baton Rouge staff and allows for future growth. A key feature is a 3,300-square-foot, flexible meeting area that can accommodate 2–300 people and be used for training, strategic planning sessions, and large gatherings. Mr. Snow emphasized the firm’s commitment to collaboration, its pattern of growth-driven relocations, and its continued dedication to remaining in downtown Baton Rouge.

- **Cecilia Bistro Expansion** – Brad Watts, owner of Cecilia Creole Bistro, provided an overview of his restaurant operations and planned expansion. He currently operates Cecilia Creole Bistro, the Cecilia Loft event space located above the restaurant, and the River Room across the street. He explained that the Elgutter building is divided into three suites: Cecilia occupies one, the second provides access to the loft used for weddings, corporate events, and other gatherings, and the third—formerly the Bengal Tap Room, which closed in 2025—has recently become available.

Mr. Watts clarified that while Cecilia has outgrown its current footprint, the expansion into the former Bengal Tap Room space is not intended to double the restaurant’s size. Instead, Cecilia will remain a 65-seat restaurant to preserve its intimate atmosphere and established dining experience. The additional space will be used to enhance operations, including the addition of a private dining room accommodating 25–30 guests with audiovisual capabilities, allowing the restaurant to host small group events it currently must decline.

The expansion will also include a larger bar seating 15–20 patrons (compared to the current five-seat bar), new restrooms, expanded kitchen capacity, and increased storage. The bar area will also serve as a waiting space for guests dining at Cecilia.

Mr. Watts emphasized that the goal is to improve functionality and guest experience without compromising the restaurant’s character. He also noted the importance of event-based business in

sustaining operations downtown, highlighting that, in addition to Cecilia, the Loft, and the River Room, the new space will further expand their ability to host events such as corporate functions, fundraisers, and private parties. The new space is anticipated to open in early May.

- **Geaux Ride Relocation** – Charles Daniel, owner of Geaux Ride, provided an overview of his business and its role downtown since opening in 2016. He described downtown as a valuable community asset and noted that Geaux Ride has served as a catalyst for increased activity, particularly in promoting biking and outdoor recreation as alternatives to dining and nightlife. Over the past decade, the business has brought approximately 25,000 visitors downtown, encouraging them to explore local restaurants, bars, and attractions.

Mr. Daniel explained that Geaux Ride has focused on activating surrounding areas to help establish downtown as a destination. The business recently expanded to a new location at 601 Laurel Street, which accommodates over 100 bicycles, provides office space, and allows for future growth. The new facility also supports additional programming, including children’s birthday parties, corporate events, and team-building activities.

Mr. Daniel highlighted Geaux Ride’s involvement in several downtown initiatives, including wayfinding projects and cultural programs such as the Black History Trail and Utility Box Tour. He emphasized his commitment to remaining downtown, citing the importance of contributing to the local community and economy. He also noted plans to continue expanding services and refresh branding in recognition of the company’s 10th anniversary.

- **BREADA/Main Street Market** - Anna Mays, Development and Communications Coordinator for BREADA, provided an overview of the organization’s role and recent initiatives. BREADA is the nonprofit responsible for operating both Main Street Market and the local Farmer’s Market.

She explained that the Main Street Market facility was originally constructed in 2002 as part of Plan Baton Rouge One and is now being reimaged under Plan Baton Rouge Three. Current efforts focus on revitalizing the space to better align with BREADA’s mission of supporting local agriculture and strengthening connections between farmers and the community.

As part of this effort, BREADA has introduced River and Roots Market, a coffee shop that emphasizes locally sourced ingredients and offers items such as fresh goods, dry products, and plants through its Farm Fresh Fridge. She also highlighted a new outreach initiative, “Coffee and Conversation,” which invites local businesses to tour the updated facility, learn about BREADA’s expanded role, and explore opportunities to use the space. Additional improvements include an upgraded teaching kitchen with audio-visual capabilities, allowing for meetings and events, as well as the return of weekly “Fresh from the Market” cooking demonstrations held every Saturday at 10:00 a.m., featuring local chefs and seasonal ingredients. Ms. Mays stated that there is a variety of vendors and restaurants currently operating in the market, and that the hours of operation are Monday through Saturday, 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

- **Interstate 10 Widening Project** – James Taylor, Project Manager at Franklin & Associates, provided an update on upcoming construction related to the Interstate 10 widening project in Baton Rouge, focused on the “flyover” section where Interstate 10 westbound crosses over Interstate 110 near the Mississippi River Bridge. The work will involve widening the westbound lanes, shifting traffic, and installing temporary barriers to protect construction crews. Lane restriping and reduced shoulder widths are expected to slow traffic in the area. Overnight complete closures will occur on weekends, Friday through Sunday, 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., beginning this weekend and continuing for approximately six consecutive weekends, weather permitting. The closure will affect the I-110 southbound exit ramp to I-

10 westbound, with traffic detoured through downtown streets, including Government Street and St. Ferdinand, or redirected to alternate crossings, such as US-190. Additional closure phases are planned, including some affecting the mainlines of I-10 and I-110, but closures will be staggered and not occur simultaneously. Mr. Taylor is coordinating with local traffic officials to adjust signal timing and manage detour traffic, while acknowledging some technological limitations. The public is encouraged to stay informed through project updates, including the website I10BR.com, 511 traveler information, and subscription-based alerts such as myDOTD.

- **MOVEBR/Bus Rapid Transit** – Jason Crain provided an update on downtown infrastructure projects. Six ADA improvement projects in the downtown area have been completed. The South Boulevard Trailhead Connection project remains under review by the railroad, and timelines depend on its approval. The project is anticipated to be advertised in the third or fourth quarter, with potential construction beginning before year-end.

Regarding the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Corridor project, eight stations are planned in the downtown area. Concrete has been poured for the platforms, except for the two eastbound stations on Florida Street. The electrical work will be finished this week, and pour the concrete before the end of next week. Overall, platform construction is nearing completion. Installation of station equipment has begun at the north end of the corridor and will proceed incrementally toward downtown.

Mr. Crain stated that a second call for projects was issued last year, allowing council members to submit proposals. This process resulted in three approved projects in the downtown area: sidewalk and ADA improvements in the Spanish Town neighborhood, ADA enhancements along River Road near the Arts and Science Museum, and the addition of parking under the interstate near Mount Zion Baptist Church. These projects are currently in the design procurement phase, with work anticipated to begin in the coming months.

Mr. Crain encouraged residents and businesses affected by ongoing construction to use the designated rapid-response phone line or website for assistance, noting that staff will work with construction managers to resolve any concerns.

- **PlacerAi** – Casey Tate updated the Commission. Placer AI has recently enhanced its monthly reports, making them more user-friendly, customizable, and easier to share. A key upgrade is the integration of AI to summarize reports and provide quick insights.

The latest report indicates strong year-over-year economic growth and outlines contributing factors. It also shows a decline in out-of-market visitors compared to March 2025; however, this is largely attributed to an unusual spike during that period caused by the Bowling Congress.

These reports are useful for compiling large datasets and establishing baseline trends, while deeper analysis helps interpret the underlying causes. They also highlight increases in daytime population and non-resident visits, both inbound and outbound, over the past year. Comparing this data across previous years, particularly alongside major events and conferences, helps explain fluctuations such as those driven by the Bowling Congress.

Long-term trends show that resident numbers remain relatively stable. The data shows out-of-market and inbound visitation have steadily increased over the past three years.

Data from Holy Fest shows increased attendance and strong engagement, with an average dwell time of 87 minutes and peak activity around 2 p.m. The event attracted visitors from across the region, including the North Shore, St. Francisville, Hammond, and New Orleans. The median attendee was in their mid-30s with approximately 2.4 children. This type of data provides valuable insight into attendee behavior, including origin and movement patterns.

While some data gaps exist due to low volume, refining searches by location or timeframe can yield more accurate insights. Overall, the reports are effective for identifying high-level trends, with the greatest value coming from drilling down into specific data points to analyze trends, identify patterns, and uncover potential issues.

New Businesses - City Roots Coffee Bar & Les Amis Bake Shoppe – II City Plaza, open Monday – Friday 7:00 AM -3:00 PM

Dominick Blanda with City Roots provided an overview. City Roots originally opened about eight years ago on Government Street. Through discussions with downtown building representatives, the opportunity arose to open a coffee location at City Plaza II to serve building tenants and the downtown community.

During early conversations with customers, it became clear there was a strong interest in a bakery. As a result, a partnership was formed with Les Amis Bakery, a Baton Rouge business with over 13 years of experience, to expand offerings downtown. The downtown location has seen strong customer traffic since opening. A formal grand opening is planned but has been delayed due to high demand.

City Roots roasts its coffee locally on Government Street, offering fresh, high-quality specialty coffee.

The location also features baked goods from Les Amis Bakery, along with paninis, salads, and plans for menu expansion, including custom bakery items such as cakes.

6. Events - Schuyler Olson updated the Commission and provided an overview of upcoming events.

- Downtown Baton Rouge will host a wide range of upcoming events, beginning with the kickoff of the Live After Five concert series this Friday, featuring the Michael Foster Project.
- As part of Love the Boot Week, a downtown cleanup event in partnership with Strong Towns is scheduled for Saturday, April 18, from 9–11 a.m.
- April events also include Earth Day at Rhorer Plaza (April 11), Blues Fest (April 17–18), and the final Bridgerton-themed breakfast at the Shaw Center River Terrace (April 26).
- In May, key events include the Crawfish King Cook-Off (May 1), Night Market BTR (May 9), a large food festival celebrating Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month near the Capitol, and Cane’s Fest at Rhorer Plaza (May 16).
- Additional programming includes ongoing events at Manship Theatre, highlighted by a Red-Carpet Gala featuring LeAnn Rimes.
- Exhibits and activities at the LSU Museum of Art, Capitol Park Museum, and the Old State Capitol will feature the Louisiana Purchase Agreement as part of America 250, along with free First Sundays and special exhibits.
- The Old Governor’s Mansion will host free events, including “Music at the Mansion” and historical exhibits.
- The Raising Cane’s River Center will host events such as Baton Rouge Zydeco and an upcoming Bob Dylan concert. The Louisiana Art & Science Museum (LASM) will hold its annual Dino Day on June 27, along with regular planetarium shows.
- A special concert is planned for May 23 at Rhorer Plaza to celebrate the return of the USS Kidd.
- Recurring events include the Baton Rouge Arts Market (May 2 and June 6) and the Red Stick Farmers Market and Main Street Market. A full list of events is available on the DDD website.

7. Commission Announcements & Updates:

- **Civil Rights Trail Event Recap** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal provided a brief recap of the unveiling of the Civil Rights Trail. The Civil Rights Trail was unveiled downtown in partnership with a corresponding trail in

North Baton Rouge. The project was officially unveiled to the public on Friday, February 27, 2026, at North Boulevard Town Square. The trail includes murals, markers, and interactive elements along the downtown greenway to educate visitors on Baton Rouge's civil rights history. It features artwork by local artist Bryson Boutte displayed on utility boxes. Maps and additional information about the trail are available on the DDD's website.

- **Neighborhood Nights No. 5** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal briefed the Commission. The DDD recently hosted a great event on March 26 on the rooftop of the Arts Council Building, with perfect weather and a strong turnout. Local businesses have been very supportive by contributing donations and prizes for activities like an Easter egg hunt. Whitney stated they are grateful for the downtown businesses that support these efforts and help showcase everything downtown has to offer to the residents. Residents are encouraged to sign up for the neighborhood newsletter to stay informed about these events.
- **ANHA Signage Unveiling** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal provided an update on the Atchafalaya Heritage Grant project. Four interpretive signs have been installed along the riverfront, highlighting the area's history and its relationship to the river. The signage was unveiled on March 3 at the Estuary at the Water Campus, and includes information recognizing the Indigenous peoples who inhabited the area before current development.
- **City Dock Management Event Recap:** Whitney Hoffman Sayal provided an update on the management of the city dock. An agreement was finalized between the City and American Queen to assist with the management of the dock area, representing a positive public-private partnership and continued investment along the riverfront.
- **Business Safety & De-Escalation Training Recap:** Whitney Hoffman Sayal provided an update. As part of the DDD strategic plan, a business safety and de-escalation training was recommended and implemented in collaboration with Corporal Wallace of the Baton Rouge Police Department. The training was well attended by a diverse group of stakeholders and was considered successful, with the possibility of offering additional sessions based on demand.

8. Public Comment:

- Paul Groves, General Director of Opera Louisiana, announced an upcoming performance of *Madame Butterfly* at the Raising Cane's River Center on April 11 at 7:00 p.m. The production features a soprano from the Metropolitan Opera and includes high-quality staging, chorus, and orchestration. Costumes originated from the Paris Opera and were constructed in Japan. The production is expected to be comparable to performances by major opera companies such as those in Houston and Atlanta. Tickets are available through Opera Louisiana
- Tim NeSmith from the USS Kidd provided an update on the ship's return and upcoming "Welcome Home" event, coordinated by a committee led by Jay Darden. The event is scheduled for May 23, beginning at 2:00 p.m., and will include multiple opening bands and activities similar in format to Live After Five. Efforts are being made to coordinate timing with Memorial Day ceremonies.
The museum will be open during the event, and organizers are hopeful the USS Kidd will be back in place, pending river levels needed to return the ship to its cradle. Planning is ongoing, with additional details to be announced. Attendees are encouraged to follow USS Kidd's social media channels for updates. The organization noted a significant decline in attendance over the past two years and expressed appreciation for continued community support.

9. **Meeting adjourned** – Eric Dexter moved to adjourn the meeting, Susan Turner seconded, and the meeting was adjourned.