

DDD COMMISSION MEETING, MINUTES

December 9, 2025

Hilton Baton Rouge Capitol Center

Board Members in Attendance: Patrick Michaels - Chairman, Gary Jupiter- Vice Chairman, Philip Jordan- Treasurer, Eric Dexter, Susan Turner, and Gary Black

Absentees: Joshua Hollins - Secretary

Others in Attendance: Whitney Hoffman Sayal, Casey Tate, Iboro Udo, Schuyler Olson, Ute Cress, Greg Wood, David Kors, Vance Baldwin, Alyria Guin, Ianne Salvoso, Dr. Jue Lamenpola, Jordan Arceneaux, Kay Shirer, Mukul Vernon, Jasmine Thomas, Caroline Marse, Emanuel Zanders, Desiree Harris, T.C. Lam, Annie Daniel, Tom Durant, Jane Polansky, Charles Daniel, Paul Groves, Bridget Gaffney, Barbara Freiberg, Felton Coleman, Karen Soniat, Mysti Byrns, Anna Mayes, Kyle Collins, Darlene Rowland, Marty Engquist, Jennifer Carwile, Nathaniel Tannehill, Samantha Morgan, Lauren L. Thompkins, Jonathan Grimes, Chisolu Isiadinso, Laura McDavitt, Katie Clark, Elena Branzaru, Joseph Ricci.

Whitney Hoffman Sayal welcomed everyone to the DDD Commission meeting and thanked our host and breakfast sponsor, the Hilton Capitol Center. Whitney mentioned that today's meeting is being held in the Heidelberg Ballroom, which has hosted the DDD's December meetings for many years. She expressed her gratitude to the Hilton staff for their continued hospitality and for providing breakfast this morning. Leslie Thompson with the Hilton welcomed attendees to the Heidelberg Ballroom. It was noted that the Hilton is approaching its 100th anniversary, to be celebrated in 2027, with plans for special commemorative events. Holiday programming was highlighted, including two Jingle Bell Brunches for families on December 14 and 21. The events include children's activities, cookie-making, and extended visits with Santa; tickets remain available, though the December 14 date is nearly sold out. In addition, "Laughs on the Low," a New Year's Eve comedy show in the tunnel featuring local comedians, was announced.

1. Patrick Michaels called the meeting to order and declared a quorum.
2. Susan Turner made a motion to approve the agenda, Eric Dexter seconded, and the motion was approved.
3. Gary Black made a motion to approve the minutes from the October 14, 2025, meeting. Susan Turner seconded, and the motion was approved
4. **Governmental Issues:**
 - **River Center Oversight Committee Update** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal provided an update to the Commission. The River Center Oversight Committee met in October, and no meetings have been held since. The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for January 27 at 10:00 a.m. and is typically held at the River Center.
 - **Historic Preservation Commission:** Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission on the Historic Preservation Commission. Items impacting downtown include exterior renovations to a property on Bungalow Lane that are scheduled for review at the meeting tomorrow, October 10th. The agenda also includes a discussion on the demolition by neglect process. For those interested, the meeting will be held tomorrow at 8:30 a.m. at the Planning Commission on Laurel Street.

- **River Road Multi-Use Corridor Projects (East & West Sides)** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal provided an update on the River Road multi-use corridor projects on both the east and west sides. On the east side, bids were accepted by the Department of Transportation last month, and contract amendments are underway for a project totaling approximately \$260,000. This project will address ADA issues near the Hilton and provide a connection to IBM. On the west side, a Recreational Trails Program grant-funded project has also gone to bid, with the bid being presented at the Council meeting this Wednesday. The Council is being asked to approve a contract amendment to align with the accepted bid. Both projects are expected to move forward in the new year. Together, they represent more than \$400,000 in grant funding secured by the DDD and will further enhance the riverfront by improving connectivity between nearby residential complexes and the levee.
- **Budget Hearings** -Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission on the Budget hearings. Due to the city-wide budget cuts, the Downtown Development District (DDD) will receive an 11% reduction in City-Parish funding. The Department of Public Works will also see reductions, affecting collaborative maintenance and streetscape efforts. The Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge reported a funding reduction of over 20%, which may impact downtown programming and events. Additional organizations presenting at budget hearings included the East Baton Rouge Parish Library and the Spanish Town Parade; Live After Five has also been proposed to have a 20% reduction. The final budget hearing is scheduled for this evening, with presentations on the Metro Council website.
- **DDD Commissioner Reappointment** - Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission on the re-appointment of Philip Jordan, b1Bank, at the Metro Council meeting in November.
- **City Dock** - Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission. At the next Metro Council meeting on Wednesday, December 10th, there is an item for the City Dock, for a public-private partnership with American Cruise Lines, who will be investing in the dock and providing some general management and maintenance.
- **Metropolitan Council Zoning (UDC Amendment Landscape & Trees)** – Vance Baldwin, Assistant Planning Director, briefed the Commission. Modifications were discussed with the Building Official and the Downtown Development District to address the amount of landscape materials included in buffers, parking, screening in street yards, dumpster screening, and adding minimum tree preservation or mitigation standards for large developments. The Metro Council Zoning Commission approved the following updates:
 - **Buffer Requirement:** Buffers are required between properties with incompatible uses to interrupt sight lines. The UDC specifies buffer widths and allows for options like landscape-only buffers or a combination of berms/fences with a narrower landscape strip.
 - **Urban Landscaping Standards:** The code mandates that at least ten percent of the developed site area must be a landscape area. Landscape plans must be prepared and certified by a professional landscape architect licensed in Louisiana.
 - **Tree Preservation Policies:** Standards are in place to encourage the preservation of existing healthy trees during site development. To receive credit for preserved trees, an owner must submit a Tree Preservation Plan for approval. The regulations include guidelines for protecting the area below the tree's drip line during construction.

5. Development Initiatives:

- **2025 DDD Yearbook Review** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal presented a report on the activities in 2025 to the Commission:

Previewing the 2025 Annual Report for Baton Rouge. The key highlights and statistics shared:

Communication & Engagement

- **Newsletter Performance:** Since its launch in 2025, the weekly newsletter has achieved a 42% open rate.
- **Social Media:** Managed by Schuyler Olson, DDD has seen significant increases in social media engagement throughout the year.

Major Investments & Infrastructure

- **Key Projects:** Highlights include major casino investments and city-wide LED lighting upgrades.
- **Public Assets:** The riverfront signage project was installed this year.

Business & Economic Development

- **New Business Highlights:** Notable openings in 2025 included Bally's, Access Sciences, Pelican Credit Union, and Desiderata Kitchen.
- **Ongoing Developments:** Planning and construction continue for the Lincoln Theater and the new Visit Baton Rouge offices located across from the Hilton.
- **Hospitality:** Major renovations were completed on the Hampton Hotel and Hotel Indigos.

Looking Ahead to 2026

- **Overview of the DDD:** Highlighted progress made under the five-year strategic plan adopted in 2023, noting that a significant portion of the plan has already been completed. Marketing efforts were also reviewed, including the Love Our Downtown campaign, with supporting data and performance metrics. Additional highlights included recent recognition of Downtown through various outlets, such as the 225 awards, presentations at the IDA conference, and acknowledgment by the Mayor at a Metro Council meeting.
- **Play Baton Rouge 3:** This initiative is wrapping up, with final results expected in early 2026.
- **Report Distribution:** The full annual report will be released in January 2026 via the newsletter, with hard copies provided to the Commission, Mentor Council, and the Mayor's Office, and digitally distributed through the Drift newsletter and the DDD website.

For future updates, you can monitor the DDD's official website or subscribe to the Downtown Development District newsletter, "The Drift".

- **Main Street Market Update** – Darlene Rowland provided an update to the Commission on the reopening of the Main Street Market following extensive renovations. Darlene expressed appreciation to Board Member and State Representative Barbara Freiberg and Founding Director and DDD Board Member Susan Turner for their instrumental support throughout the project. The renovated market now features five new restaurants and cafés and includes significant interior improvements, such as the removal of steel structures along the windows to create open seating and increased natural light.

The River and Roots Market, a BREADA initiative, was highlighted as a multi-purpose space supporting local farmers and producers. The café features locally sourced dairy products, retail merchandise, and shelf-stable goods from area farmers, and now operates with a dedicated on-site manager. Operating hours for the Main Street Market are Monday through Saturday, 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Additional vendors were introduced, including Creole Creations (Louisiana seafood and Creole comfort food), Sapore (fast-casual Indian cuisine), Cozy Griddle (breakfast and comfort food), and Vivian's Rotisserie and Grill (health-focused offerings). The vendor mix was noted as providing a diverse range of options for the downtown community.

- **Rotary Peace Pole** –Gregory Wood, Immediate Past President of the Rotary Club of Baton Rouge, presented an overview of the Rotary Peace Pole Initiative and announced an upcoming downtown installation in partnership with the Downtown Development District (DDD). The Peace Pole dedication is scheduled for Monday, December 15, at 8:30 a.m. at the Louisiana Avenue Connector, located beneath the overpass. This installation represents the first aluminum and surface-mounted Peace Pole in the Baton Rouge area.
Mr. Wood explained that Peace Poles serve as visible symbols of peace, bearing the message “May Peace Prevail on Earth” in four languages. The Rotary Club selected locations throughout the community to maximize visibility and impact, including schools, hospitals, law enforcement facilities, and civic spaces. To date, 18 Peace Poles have been installed locally, with a 19th planned for installation at the Capital Area United Way on Laurel Street. Rotary anticipates installing an additional 10–12 Peace Poles in 2026. Appreciation was expressed to DDD staff for their collaboration on site selection and installation. The Louisiana Avenue Connector location was highlighted as a placemaking feature that helps connect the downtown district and enhance the Downtown Greenway.
- **Entergy Downtown Updates** – Gabe Vicknair and Desiree Harris with Entergy updated the Commission. Mr. Vicknair provided an update on a downtown electrical infrastructure project to improve reliability and support future development. The project involves installing new underground duct banks and circuits from the Beauregard Town substation along St. Charles Street to North Boulevard. Work is underway, with completion of the duct bank phase expected by late February, pending a Corps of Engineers permit for work near the levee. Cable installation is anticipated to follow, with overall project completion targeted for the end of March. The project is designed to improve system reliability and minimize outages, with no planned service disruptions during construction.
Desiree Harris provided the Commission with an update on the LED lighting partnership between the Mayor’s Office, City-Parish, Entergy, and the DDD. More than 1,100 streetlights were converted to LED fixtures in Phase One, with an additional 100+ lights completed in Phase Two. The LED upgrades improve energy efficiency, lighting quality, safety, and longevity. A small number of lights affected by vegetation issues will be addressed once access is cleared.
- **Lincoln Theater** – Dr. Thomas Ray Duran Jr., Vice President of the Board for the Lincoln Theater and the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame, provided an update on the Lincoln Theater revitalization project. The project remains focused on raising approximately \$750,000 annually for operations. Dr. Anna Daniel was introduced as the newly hired Fund and Development Director and provided a progress report. Construction of the historic Lincoln Theater is in its final stages, with an anticipated opening in early 2026. Remaining work includes seating installation, lighting, and audio systems, museum exhibits, exterior signage, and landscaping. The facility will include a performance arts theater and museum and is intended to serve as a cultural learning center, youth engagement hub, and catalyst for revitalization in South Baton Rouge.
Organizational updates include board and governance enhancements, implementation of ticketing systems, staffing and volunteer recruitment, development of marketing and community engagement plans, and partnership building. Sustainability efforts are focused on fundraising, grants, corporate sponsorships, event revenue, and community support. Naming opportunities, donor recognition, and membership programs were noted as current fundraising initiatives. The adjacent Hotel Lincoln is under construction, further supporting the area’s cultural redevelopment.
- **Hotel Lincoln Update** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal briefed the Commission. The Hotel Lincoln is under construction, further supporting the area’s cultural redevelopment. Historically, the Hotel Lincoln and

the Lincoln Theater were closely connected, with performers from the theater traditionally staying at the hotel, which is located just a few blocks away. Anthony Kimball is expected to join a future meeting, potentially in February, to provide an update on the restoration of this cultural landmark.

- **Placer AI** – Casey Tate briefed the Commission on downtown event data gathered using Placer AI, a program DDD has been relying on to track how many people visit downtown during specific times. Casey explained that Placer AI provides location insights and foot traffic data, which DDD uses alongside its marketing efforts. Casey highlighted the impact of small and mid-sized downtown events as significant drivers of visitation and economic activity. Weekly and seasonal events such as Jambalaya Jam (3,200 attendees), Halloween pub crawls (over 10,000 attendees on the Saturday before Halloween), the Book Festival (6,500 attendees), Capital City Beer Fest (1,400 attendees), and the Red Stick Farmers Market (averaging 2,000 attendees weekly, with 2,600 attendees for its 29th anniversary) were noted as highly successful.

These events attract a diverse range of visitors, including residents, workers, families, and nightlife patrons, and contribute to consistent downtown activity beyond major festivals and parades.

Downtown businesses and organizers were encouraged to continue and expand such programming.

- **Retail Study** – Mukul Verma with Through-Line Consultants updated the Commission on a comprehensive retail study aimed at assessing vacant storefronts and identifying opportunities to strengthen the downtown retail environment. As part of this effort, interviews and surveys have been conducted with real estate professionals and potential vendors interested in locating downtown. A presentation was given on strategies to attract and support more retail downtown, based on research of comparable cities, stakeholder interviews, broker and retailer surveys, and analysis of best practices. Three core strategies were identified: (1) draw more customers downtown, (2) make retail easier to launch and operate, and (3) plan for long-term growth.

Key recommendations to increase visitation included improved parking enforcement and communication, use of modern parking technology, enhanced safety through visible policing and improved lighting, expansion and coordination of events, and increased activation through small and mid-sized events. Parking revenue was identified as a potential funding source for downtown improvements and events.

To make retail easier to launch, proposed actions included tenant improvement and façade grants, first-year operating subsidies, an interactive downtown retail startup guide, streamlined permitting, a retail prospectus for brokers, and the creation of a retail incubator to support startup businesses.

Long-term growth strategies focused on recruiting anchor destinations and entertainment uses, clustering retail in key areas such as around the Main Street Market, and incentivizing family-friendly and community-oriented attractions. Suggested next steps included pursuing parking improvements and façade grants, initiatives like hiring an events coordinator and establishing an incubator, securing anchor tenants and develop sustainable funding mechanisms.

Whitney Hoffman emphasized that successful retail recruitment downtown depends on access to capital, availability of appropriate retail spaces, and entrepreneurs willing to take calculated risks.

Downtown residential and visitor occupancy rates remain high, indicating a strong and growing customer base, with additional housing expected to further support retail demand.

Parking access and management were identified as key opportunities, with an emphasis on creating turnover to improve customer access rather than revenue generation alone. Parking revenue was noted as a potential tool to fund additional development and streetscape improvements. The importance of stakeholder engagement and ongoing initiatives, including partnerships such as with the LSU Small

Business Development Center, was acknowledged as part of the broader strategy to attract and support downtown retail growth.

- **LSU SBDC Partnership Open House** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal updated the Commission on the LSU Small Business Development Center (SBDC) partnership. The SBDC staff are located in the DDD office every Friday and are available for walk-in consultations. An open house held in late October attracted approximately 20 attendees and served as an informal introduction to SBDC services. The SBDC assists prospective and existing businesses with business planning, guidance, and identifying potential downtown locations, in coordination with DDD staff.

- **New Businesses:**

- **Main Street Market:**
 - **River and Roots Market:** A coffee shop and market owned and operated by BREADA
 - **Creole Creations:** Louisiana Creole Creations serves authentic Louisiana seafood and classic Creole comfort dishes.
 - **Sapor Indian Fusion:** Sapor Indian Fusion brings the bold flavors of India to your day — fast, fresh, and unforgettable
 - **The Cozy Griddle:** A breakfast and lunch restaurant dedicated and committed to serving classic comfort food with a modern twist.
 - **Vivian's Rotisserie & Grill:** Serves up fresh, wholesome meals made with care — from our signature rotisserie chicken to flavorful cauliflower rice and a variety of vegetarian and vegan options
- **Bally's Hotel and Casino** – 102 France Street opened Saturday, December 6, 2026
- **Hotel Indigo** – 200 Convention, recently acquired by ANR Group
- **Danny's Dive Bar & Grill** – 151 Third Street, Danny Wilson, Owner
- **Pelican Credit Union** - 510 N. 6th Street
- **Zenatech** - AI Division for Advanced AI-Driven Drone Solutions for US Defense and Homeland Security located in the Rivermark
- **Rougaroux Bayou Birria** - Spanish Town Market

6. **Events - Schuyler Olson updated the Commission:** An overview of upcoming downtown holiday and winter events was provided. Highlights include the inaugural First Responders Operation Safe Santa Parade on December 14; Jazzy Christmas on the Lawn; holiday river cruises with Baton Rouge Cruises; and a downtown church pilgrimage on December 14. Seasonal music events include performances by the Baton Rouge Symphony, including *Handel's Messiah*, Holiday Brass, and other holiday concerts. Additional events include Jingle Bell Brunch at the Hilton, New Year's Eve celebrations at the Shaw Center and Royal Plaza, holiday programming at Manship Theatre, River Center events such as skating on the river and *The Nutcracker*, and Coca-Cola-themed Christmas activities at LASM. Ongoing and upcoming exhibits were noted at the LSU Museum of Art, Capitol Park Museum, and Old State Capitol. The Baton Rouge Arts Market will add two additional dates, and the Red Stick Farmers Market and Main Street Market will remain open on Saturdays. Full event details are available on the DDD website.

7. **Commission Announcements & Updates:**

- **Plan Baton Rouge III Update** – Eric Dexter provided an update on the PBR3 planning process. The third and final community open house was held last month, concluding a year of public engagement that included more than 5,000 points of community input through open houses, advisory groups, focus groups, surveys, and public comments. A final draft of the plan is expected from the Sasaki team by the end of the year, with a public comment period to open at the beginning of the new year.

The finalized plan will be presented to the Downtown Development District, Planning Commission, and Metro Council for endorsement and adoption. It was noted that while implementation will require long-term investment and additional funding, adoption of the plan is critical as it enables access to grants and other funding opportunities by demonstrating documented community support.

- **Holiday Business Storefront Decoration:** Whitney Hoffman Sayal Staff recognized the DDD staff for their efforts in decorating the DDD office for the holidays. Appreciation was also expressed for residents and downtown businesses that have decorated their storefronts and properties, with encouragement for attendees to view and support these festive displays.
- **Downtown Throwback** – Whitney Hoffman Sayal stated this week in history in 2003, the downtown Baton Rouge skyline drastically changed when multiple buildings were imploded. The Commission viewed a video from WBRZ showing casing the implosions. The old Department of Insurance building that once stood right next to the State Capitol came down, and two weeks earlier, the old education and natural resources buildings were imploded. New high-rise buildings were planned to replace those being demolished, at a time when the state was spending millions of dollars annually on rent for office space across Baton Rouge. These changes were part of an ambitious seven-year, \$300 million initiative to consolidate state employees downtown near the seat of government.
- **Red Stick Revelry** – Casey Tate provided an update on Red Stick Revelry, Baton Rouge's New Year's Eve celebration, which will take place downtown on New Year's Eve and include the annual Red Stick drop. Musical performances will feature Press One for English and After Eight. Appreciation was expressed to sponsors Louisiana First Network, Visit Baton Rouge, and BankPlus for supporting the event.

8. Public Comment:

- **Paul Groves, General Director of Opera Louisiana**, provided an update on recent and upcoming activities. He reported a successful fall season. Upcoming events include the family-friendly Christmas production *Amahl and the Night Visitors* on December 19–21 at the Manship Theatre, featuring pre-show crafts and activities for children. Mr. Groves also announced a large-scale production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* on April 11 at the Raising Cane's River Center. He noted that Opera Louisiana continues to thrive and remains committed to bringing top-tier classical talent to Baton Rouge.
- Elena Branzaru and Laura McDavitt provided an overview of the inaugural Operation Safe Santa Parade, coordinated in partnership with the Robert A. Bogan Fire Museum, the Downtown Development District, and the Mayor's Office. Laura McDavitt, Vice President of the Robert A. Bogan Fire Museum, reported that more than 35 first responder units from six parishes and Pascagoula, Mississippi, will participate. The daytime parade will take place on Sunday, December 14, from 2:00–4:00 p.m. The event will feature fire trucks, police and emergency vehicles, wildlife and fisheries units, antique fire trucks, and other specialty vehicles, with holiday music and family-friendly activities. Ms. McDavitt announced that the Grand Marshal and Junior Grand Marshal will be the widow and child of fallen Baton Rouge Police Officer Caleb Eisworth, with veterans and Junior ROTC members also participating. Downtown businesses were encouraged to post event flyers and help promote the parade. Organizers expressed hope that Operation Safe Santa will become an annual event and thanked all partners and first responders for their support.
- Whitney Hoffman Sayal acknowledged Representative Freiberg for attending the DDD meeting, as well as BRPD for being present. We truly appreciate the support.

9. Meeting adjourned – Philip Jordan moved to adjourn the meeting, Eric Dexter seconded, and the meeting was adjourned.