Three years ago, when a group of local government officials started to take a close look at the hundreds of blighted properties scattered throughout Baton Rouge, they realized there was no way under the current city system to tackle such a vast problem.
Instead, they opted to create a new organization from the ground up. The result was the East Baton Rouge Parish Redevelopment Authority, which set off in 2009 with the goal of revitalizing the city’s blighted areas by assisting public and private investment in poor areas struggling with blighted and abandoned properties.

The RDA marked three years of operation last week by releasing a report that says the group helped create 3,350 jobs, supported the creation of more than 700 affordable housing units, and boosted local and state tax collections by a combined $17.7 million.

“The needs of our community remain great, but we are extremely proud of what we've been able to accomplish in such a short period of time,” said Executive Director Walter Monsour, who served as Mayor Kip Holden’s second-in-command for several years before taking over the RDA.

The choreographed report presentation at the Old State Capitol was a prelude to a push for more permanent funding for the RDA, which has survived on one-time donations from other public agencies and a combination of federal grants and tax credits. The RDA, which has a staff of 12, spent $4.6 million and generated $7.4 million from 2009 to 2011.

John Nolan, who chairs the RDA board, said the three-year report allows taxpayers to make an informed judgment about whether or not the RDA is what the community needs.

“I believe that most of the people of this parish, when informed about the depth of the blight and the distress in some of our neighborhoods in the community, feel like this kind of work is good public policy,” he said.

The mayor’s office and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation led the creation of the authority. Early on, the initiative received a financial boost from $1 million in seed money from the East Baton Rouge Mortgage Finance Authority and $500,000 in matching money from the city-parish. Community leaders and RDA staff visited Portland, Ore., Richmond, and other cities to see first-hand how older and better-developed revitalization programs were working.

Building on a series of public meetings, the RDA and a group of consultants created community improvement plans for five problem areas within Baton Rouge: Choctaw Corridor, Northdale/Standard Heights, Melrose East, Scotlandville Gateway, and Zion City/Glen Oaks. It also created a database that will include the thousands of blighted and adjudicated properties in the city.

The RDA estimated that the parish had a deficiency of 1,500
affordable housing units – a difficult obstacle to overcome for families and individuals seeking safe and affordable housing.

Monsour said developers consistently cited the lack of available capital as the top obstacle to developing more affordable housing projects in lower income areas of Baton Rouge.

RDA officials said the organization has invested $19.7 million in housing and economic development projects in poor areas – helping facilitate $200 million in total project costs.

Those dollars ranged from $4.8 million in gap financing for projects such as affordable housing for seniors to the Hampton Inn and Suites hotel set to open in downtown Baton Rouge next year.

The RDA also provided funds for the ExxonMobil YMCA, a 22,000 square-foot facility that is the first YMCA fitness center in North Baton Rouge.

Other RDA-financed projects in the works include The Elysian, a large apartment development on Spanish Town Road near I-110 that is under construction, and Smiley Heights, a 190-acre site north of Florida Boulevard acquired by the RDA for the development of an urban village that will also house an automotive training center for The Louisiana Technical College System.

“This project will absolutely transform the surrounding community,” Monsour said.

In the meantime, RDA officials will continue to seek a more reliable source of funding.

The project has the full backing of the man who is currently the most influential person in Baton Rouge government: Mayor Kip Holden, who praised the RDA for its work.

“They are proof of what our city parish can accomplish when we work together,” Holden said.