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## Thirty years later, Florida Boulevard is still a no man's land

By **Stephanie Riegel**

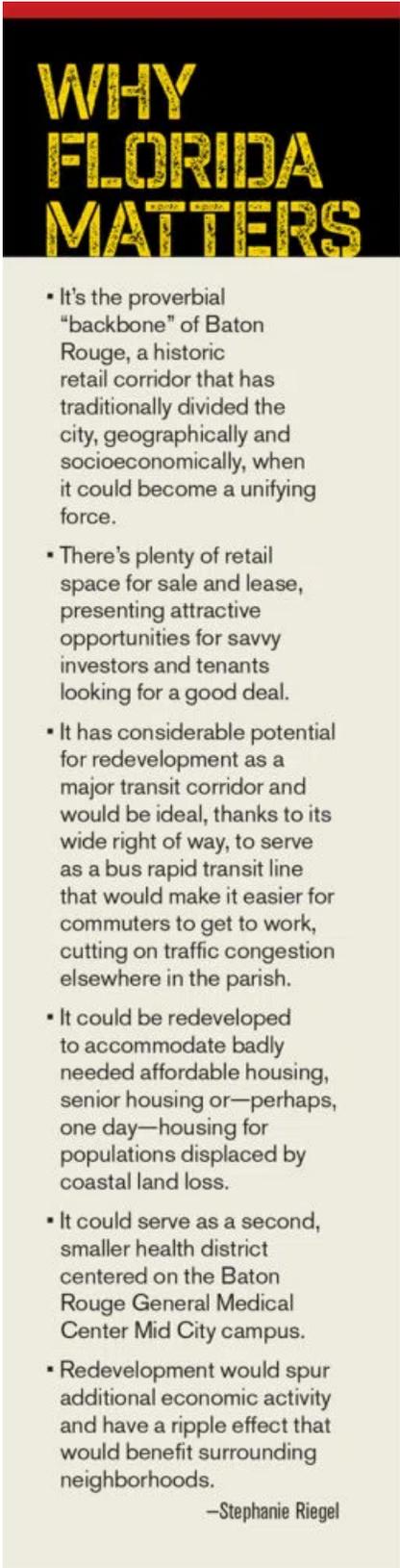


**MASS DESTRUCTION:** This Florida Boulevard building was open for business as of last June, but now it's in shambles following a July 2018 fire. (Don Kadair)



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In 1986, a group of civic leaders got together to address some of the problems in Baton Rouge that might sound familiar to residents of the parish today—sprawl, traffic, flooding and the increasing polarization between the economically underserved northern part of the parish and the prosperous south.



## WHY FLORIDA MATTERS

- It's the proverbial "backbone" of Baton Rouge, a historic retail corridor that has traditionally divided the city, geographically and socioeconomically, when it could become a unifying force.
- There's plenty of retail space for sale and lease, presenting attractive opportunities for savvy investors and tenants looking for a good deal.
- It has considerable potential for redevelopment as a major transit corridor and would be ideal, thanks to its wide right of way, to serve as a bus rapid transit line that would make it easier for commuters to get to work, cutting on traffic congestion elsewhere in the parish.
- It could be redeveloped to accommodate badly needed affordable housing, senior housing or—perhaps, one day—housing for populations displaced by coastal land loss.
- It could serve as a second, smaller health district centered on the Baton Rouge General Medical Center Mid City campus.
- Redevelopment would spur additional economic activity and have a ripple effect that would benefit surrounding neighborhoods.

—Stephanie Riegel

*(Click graphic to enlarge.)*

Though the goal was to tackle broad, systemic issues, the plan focused specifically on Florida Boulevard, seen as a potential laboratory for change. The nearly 20-mile state artery that runs from the river downtown to the Livingston Parish line served then, as it

does now, as a commercial corridor, a commuter thoroughfare and the effective dividing line between the two Baton Rouges.

What if, those planners of the mid-1980s brainstormed, Florida Boulevard could become a catalyst for redevelopment that brings the two halves of the parish together, instead of keeping them apart?

“Florida wasn’t totally run down in those years, but it was on its way down,” recalls architect Raymond “Skipper” Post, who was instrumental in bringing the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) of architects and planners to the city to conduct five days of charrettes and a draft master plan for redevelopment. “They said, instead of Florida being the dividing line, it needs to be the gathering point between north and south, the ‘living room’ of Baton Rouge.”

Though the plan was significant to the extent that it inspired subsequent, successful planning efforts, none of its specific recommendations for Florida Boulevard was ever implemented. More than 30 years later, what once was envisioned as the future living room of Baton Rouge looks more like the mud room.

Dozens of commercial properties sit vacant or partially empty, the result of retailers that have relocated to greener pastures or closed altogether. Lease rates vary, but in some cases older office or retail space can be had for as little as \$8 per square foot.

Ineffective zoning regulations enable outdated and obsolete signage to remain standing, while failing to address the wide, deep setbacks that make it all but impossible for pedestrians to navigate their way from one big-box parking lot to the next, much less safely cross the street.

A stark reminder of just how troubled the once vibrant, mid-century retail corridor has become is Cortana Mall, which has been on the market for three years at virtual fire sale prices, unable to attract a buyer.



**DASHED HOPES:** *It was thought the adaptive reuse transformation of the former Bon Marché Mall into the Bon Carré Business and Technology Center would be a catalyst for Florida Boulevard investment, but the property has struggled to remain economically viable and Commercial Properties Realty Trust defaulted on the mortgage in late 2017. (Collin Richie)*

Another is the nearby Bon Carré Business and Technology Center, which shows that even an adaptive reuse has only limited economic viability. The one-time shopping center was redeveloped into a business park by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation's Commercial Properties Realty Trust in the early 2000s, which saved the 700,000-structure from the sad fate of many of its neighboring commercial centers.

But CPRT defaulted on its mortgage in late 2017 and the lenders took back the property after refusing to renegotiate a better deal. More than a year later, they've been unable to sell Bon Carré at auction, despite two attempts in the past six months.

Planners point to myriad solutions that would go a long way towards addressing the problem: better code enforcement, major changes in the zoning regulations, creative and adaptive reuse of large vacant parcels, implementation of mass transit solutions like bus rapid transit, and improvements to lighting and landscaping.

But to do that requires a plan and, more importantly, the political will to implement it. Plenty of stakeholders, including elected officials, planners, residents and realtors, say they'd like to see such a plan take shape. But for now, at least, no one is taking the lead or taking concrete steps to make anything happen.

## **Knocking on doors**

When Richard Empson and his wife moved to Sherwood Forest as a young couple in the mid-1970s, Florida Boulevard was in its heyday—a busy, commercial corridor designed to serve the growing population and sprawling subdivisions developed successively farther away from the traditional city center. Back then, Florida was home to supermarkets, drug stores, bank branches, specialty shops and what today would be called fast-casual restaurants—mass market establishments that catered to suburban, middle-class Baton Rouge.



**“If the city could just come in and clean up the street it would make a big difference. If they could enforce the code, find out who owns the blighted buildings and make them clean them up. Why is that so hard?”**

**RICHARD EMPSON**, Sherwood Forest resident

*(Don Kadair)*

In the decades since, Empson has watched the gradual decline and he is frustrated. He counts some 50 businesses that have packed up and left over the past 25 years. He also keeps a running list of new establishments that have moved in—17 used tire stores and

six check cashing outlets between Broadmoor and Flannery alone, a mere three-mile stretch.

Empson and his wife have tried to market the corridor themselves to businesses, literally knocking on doors and cold calling retailers, suggesting possible locations with cheap, available storefronts. They've also enlisted the help of a local real estate agent. So far, they haven't had any success.

"We contacted Jambalaya Shoppe. They didn't come. We tried RaceTrac. We tried UPS. We tried the U.S. Postal Service," he says. "We called donut shops, restaurants, but a lot of them are franchise businesses and they don't want to locate in a place where they don't see the viability."

Part of the problem is demographic. As Howard Kadair told *Business Report* in 2009, when he closed the last of what once were three Kadair's photography stores along Florida Boulevard, "the city has moved away from Florida Boulevard. We're just following the demographics."

As those demographics migrated south towards Perkins Road and Bluebonnet Boulevard, Florida was—if not altogether abandoned—largely forgotten. Prices fell. Vacancies rose. Worsening socioeconomic conditions of low-income residents in the north of the parish exacerbated the problems. It was a downward spiral that continues to this day.

But Planning Director Frank Duke says it's easy to blame demographics for the current condition of Florida. He believes the problems are also based, in part, on poor planning and zoning.

"You've got problems with the design of the road," he says. "You've got regulations governing the properties abutting the road. The fact there aren't any safe pedestrian crossings is a problem. Lack of sidewalks is a problem. Lighting. There are many contributing factors."

### **Unintended consequences**

Ironically, an overlay district for Florida Boulevard created in the 1980s in a well-intended effort to improve the corridor is among the reasons the regulations governing the area are so problematic.

For one, the signage code in the overlay district is weak and ineffective. It makes generous exceptions for nonconforming signs, allowing, for example, a sign to remain

standing outside a retail center if just a single establishment in an otherwise vacant and abandoned strip remains in business. That's why there are so many broken, cracked and outdated signs along the corridor.



**ZONED OUT:** Reimagining Florida Boulevard is made tougher by zoning regulations that allow for deep setbacks, like at this strip center and flea market, that 1) makes it difficult for pedestrians to make their way from one big-box parking lot to the next and 2) speeds roadway traffic, when the long-term objective is to slow it down. (Don Kadair)

The code also allows for monument signs to be as high as 25 feet tall, roughly the equivalent of a three-story building. By definition, monument signs are supposed to be low to the ground—around 5 feet or so—and more visually appealing.

At the same time, the overlay district regulations governing setbacks on Florida are prohibitively restrictive, requiring deep setbacks that have pushed retail storefronts far back from the roadway, enabling traffic to speed up, not slow down.

"If you want traffic to slow down, you want to bring buildings closer to the street not set them back," Duke says. "That's the problem with overlay districts. People think they're doing a good thing. If they're not careful, they make things worse, reinforce suburban sprawl and have all sorts of unintended consequences."

There are other problems, too. The corridor is built like a rural four-lane highway, designed to move vehicles instead of pedestrians. It's poorly lit. There are no crosswalks or sidewalks. Enforcement of what rules are on the books exist is generally weak.

Empson sees a lot of low-hanging fruit, relatively simple solutions that would go a long way towards addressing the problems on the street.

"If the city could just come in and clean up the street it would make a big difference," he says. "If they could enforce the code, find out who owns the blighted buildings and make them clean them up. Why is that so hard?"

## The need for a plan

Empson and other neighborhood leaders from his area recently met with Mayor Sharon Weston Broome to discuss the issue. She and her assistant chief administrative officer, Kelvin Hill, say they recognize the need to do something, and plan to look at revising parish ordinances dealing with code enforcement. They also point to a bill the parish is pushing in the current legislative session that would make it easier to clean up blighted properties. They agree more needs to be done.

**GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN**

Florida Boulevard used to be thriving retail corridor in Baton Rouge. Over the past three decades, however, dozens of businesses have left for greener pastures elsewhere in the market or shut their doors altogether. Here's a partial list of what's gone.

<p><b>RETAILERS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Home Depot</li> <li>Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana</li> <li>Kadair's</li> <li>Kornmeyer's Furniture</li> <li>Brian Harris Jeep</li> <li>Richard's Honda</li> <li>Louisiana Nursery</li> <li>Albertons</li> <li>Winn Dixie</li> <li>A&amp;P</li> <li>National</li> <li>K-Mart</li> <li>Courtland's Catering</li> <li>New Generation</li> <li>Flower Basket</li> <li>Broadmoor Florist</li> <li>Foxy's Fitness</li> <li>Anytime Fitness</li> <li>Hancock Fabrics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jim Walter Homes</li> <li>Tic Toc Shoe Repair</li> <li>Cedars furniture store</li> <li>Region's Bank</li> <li>Wolf's Cleaner</li> <li>Country Time clock shop</li> <li>Lagniappe Frame Shop</li> <li>Tuesday Morning</li> <li>Big Lots</li> <li>Book Exchange</li> <li>IH Rubenstein</li> <li>Common Cents</li> <li>Radio Shack</li> </ul> <p><b>RESTAURANTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shoney's</li> <li>Catfish House</li> <li>Anthony's Italian Deli</li> <li>Brunet's Seafood</li> <li>Wendy's</li> <li>Ms. Goldy's Hamburgers</li> </ul>	 <p><b>KODACHROME:</b> This vacant Florida Boulevard structure was the long-time home of the iconic Kadair's camera and electronics store.</p>
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*(Click graphic to enlarge)*

But Broome also believes there's a need for a comprehensive master plan, something she says she'd like to see the business community or some other parish entity take the lead on.

"I think we should adhere to a plan that is a collaboration between folks like the Center for Planning Excellence and the EBR Redevelopment Authority and the administration," she says. "If we don't have a plan I don't think we'll be effective so we are definitely going to make that a priority."

Master planning for a major thoroughfare can be effective. A New Orleans-based urban planning firm currently working on a plan to redevelop the Plank Road corridor for the

RDA has created an ambitious plan for Washington Avenue in Houston's economically challenged Gulton-Sharpstown neighborhood. Renderings by the firm, Asakura Robinson, show the five-lane commercial thoroughfare transformed into a pedestrian-friendly, landscaped corridor with dedicated bicycle and bus rapid transit lanes. Matt Rufo, who worked on the plan, says several factors have helped enable the transformation.

"In attracting people there, what we found in Houston—and this is the rule in the rest of the country—is that it's about creating places where people want to be," he says. "When it comes to looking at the public sector, it's not just about making sure the zoning is appropriate and the public infrastructure is there but what are the public spaces we can provide?"

Another key is flexible zoning. Much of the reinvestment along Washington Avenue has occurred because of Houston's flexible zoning code, which allows developers to respond to changing market conditions, developing affordable townhomes or badly needed elderly housing complexes in deep, vacant parking lots, he says.



(Don Kadair)

Tax incentives help, of course, be they at the local or state level. But more important than TIFs or Opportunity Zones, Rufo believes, is a committed, public-private entity that works with local development corporations to make redevelopment a priority. In Houston, the Houston/Galveston Area Council has taken the lead in focusing on creating a strategy for Washington Avenue that looks at improving the pedestrian experience, and restoring any historic buildings that exist along the mostly mid-century modern corridor.

"It's great to come up with a laundry list of strategies and programming things like farmers markets," he says. "But you need resources and a committed group to carry them out."

### **What might work**

Chris Tyson, president and CEO of the RDA, and CPEX Executive Director Camille Manning Broome both agree a master planning effort is in order. But neither of their agencies is ready or able to tackle a redevelopment of the size and scale an overhaul of Florida Boulevard would require. The RDA is focusing instead on Plank Road, which is shorter and more "bite-sized," Tyson says, yet has more blight and fewer commercial properties.

"Florida is a big, long-term project that requires a huge lift," he says. "I think as part of our future planning, once we can get some more wins from a redevelopment standpoint, we could look at it."

Like Broome at CPEX, Tyson believes transit-oriented redevelopment holds a lot of potential for Florida Boulevard, with wide lanes and rights-of-way that could be repurposed, in part, for bus rapid transit and bicycle lanes.

It's not a new idea. More than a decade ago, planners working on Baton Rouge's current master plan, FuturEBR, identified Florida Boulevard as a major transit corridor and could be one of three locations in north Baton Rouge for effective bus rapid transit. But nothing has come of those plans.

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### **Related story:**

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Former retail strips and ample parking lots could also be redeveloped into senior or affordable housing or, even, thinking long term, housing sites for populations displaced by land loss in the coastal parishes of the state.

"We're likely going to see coastal resettlement south of here with more frequent and ferocious storms," he says. "As the above sea level community 100 miles from the gulf, Baton Rouge could be a receiving community for some of these people. Florida Boulevard could play a role in this."

But, again, that requires long-term planning and follow through, something that has been lacking on Florida Boulevard.

Post, the architect, wonders what would have happened if city leaders had acted all those years ago on the recommendations put forth in R/UDAT, a plan that predicted so many of the challenges Baton Rouge in general, and Florida Boulevard specifically, still grapple with today.

"The plan and program that we offer encompasses the 'grand concept and the doable project,'" the study prophetically concluded. "You and your elected leadership must seriously consider this program for implementation now. Your community cannot afford to wait."

