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Pleasantville

Developers across the Capital Region are rushing to build traditional neighborhood developments. Why have these mixed-use throwbacks to a simpler time become so popular?

By [Timothy Boone](#)

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Baton Rouge has traditionally been a city composed of suburban neighborhoods. Drive down major streets such as Highland Road, and single-entrance subdivisions line the road. But a group of developers, architects and attorneys want to change all that and are pitching a new way to live in traditional neighborhood developments, which blend homes, apartments, office and commercial space into one community.

Supporters of these TNDs say the communities are a return to the way people used to live before World War II and the suburban sprawl made possible by widespread ownership of the automobile.

"Prior to World War II, we all lived in TNDs," says Charles Landry, a Baton Rouge attorney who, along with Lafayette architect Steve Oubre and developer Robert Daigle, has become a kind of Johnny Appleseed for the developments in South Louisiana. "People lived over the bakery shop or walked down the street to go to the dentist or to the corner store to buy milk and bread. It was more of a dense environment."

Landry defines a TND as a compact, planned development with a grid of narrow streets, a mix of housing types and a mingling of commercial and residential space.

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Right now there are more than a dozen TNDs or TND-like developments in the works around Baton Rouge, covering an area of about 5 square miles. The developments have even spread to outlying rural areas such as Central and West Baton Rouge Parish. The projects run the gamut from Juban Crossing, a 471-acre development at Juban Road and Interstate 12 in Denham Springs, which will feature 1.3 million square feet of retail space (including room for four big-box retailers) to Smiley Heights, a mixed-income community with 1,200 households near the heart of Mall City.

The projects are drawing big names in the local real estate market--Commercial Properties, the for-profit arm of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation is behind Smiley Heights, while Juban Crossing is a collaboration between Creekstone Companies, which is building the Towne Center at Cedar Lodge, and Jim Wilson and Associates, developers of the Mall of Louisiana. Developer Robert Day, who owns apartment complexes around LSU is planning an 800-acre development at I-12 and O'Neal Lane that will include two film studios. Mike Wampold, who owns several downtown office buildings, has plans for a 520-acre planned community off Bluebonnet Boulevard. Wampold's development isn't strictly a TND, but it is a large-scale, mixed-use community with town centers for shopping and different housing choices.

George Kurz of Kurz & Hebert Commercial Real Estate, the current president of the Baton Rouge Growth Coalition, expects all of the TNDs will eventually be built. "Many on the table today will be part of the master plan of the future," he says.

What's going on in Baton Rouge is being mirrored nationwide. According to The Wall Street Journal, about 500 TNDs have been developed across the United States, with tens of thousands of homes. One community planner in New York told the newspaper he estimates in the next decade as many as 20% to 30% of all new subdivisions will be TNDs.

"Baton Rouge is becoming a more sophisticated market," Kurz says. "People want more from where they live and what they do for fun. They've seen what goes on in other communities, and they want some of those same types of conveniences here in a community setting."

The market for the developments is endless, says Oubre, who has designed 30 TNDs across the nation, including five in the Baton Rouge area. "You have people saying, 'We already have a TND in the market; we can't do another one,'" he says. "That's absolutely ridiculous." Oubre says that's like saying because a conventional subdivision is going up in one part of town, the area can't support another.

Several factors are driving the TND development. For one, there's a kind of "monkey see, monkey do" attitude among developers. The success of the River Ranch TND, where about 1,200 people are now living, has helped stimulate Lafayette's growth. River Ranch is about 75% completed, and the first grocery store in the development, Fresh Market, is set to open this spring. Getting the North Carolina-based chain to come into River Ranch is expected to stimulate more retail and residential development.

"I don't want to believe that TND development has become a fad, but to some extent that's true," Oubre says. "People are seeing an opportunity and taking advantage of it."

Oubre says that's not a bad thing since the projects show development can be profitable and smart at the same time.

But Landry scoffs at calling the developments a fad, noting that prior to World War II, everyone lived in what would now be a TND. Some of the most popular neighborhoods in Baton Rouge, such as Spanish Town and the Perkins Road overpass all have a comingling of residential and retail space and are pedestrian friendly. The issue is that zoning made it illegal to develop neighborhoods like that.

Rachel DiResto, assistant director of Plan Baton Rouge, says the TND trend has gotten so popular that some developers are slapping the moniker on projects that don't meet the definition.

"Some projects that call themselves TNDs don't allow for a variety of housing or price points, and do not connect to surrounding neighborhoods," she says. "That's missing the mark."

Oubre warns that projects with only some of the TND elements, such as dense housing, won't work and could lead to more sprawl.

"This is a kit of parts, much like a car engine is a kit of parts," he says. "It doesn't operate unless you use everything. You can't use bits and pieces or it will backfire."

Along with the hot cachet of TNDs, another factor driving the development is that the rigid controls make it easier to sell the projects to local governments and the "not in my backyard" crowd.

"People know what's going to be in their rear-view mirror when they back out," Landry says. "That gives enormous comfort to communities. A TND ordinance has very high minimum standards."

Kurz says TND projects give local governments control over large tracts of land. Because an ordinance for the projects is so detailed, it doesn't require the sort of monitoring and good faith efforts on the part of developers as other kinds of developments.

"When a TND goes in on a large acreage tract, the planning commission is taking the tack that the community deserves to know where growth is going and that it's going on in a qualified, quality matter," he says.

David Barrow, chairman of the Planning and Zoning Committee for the city of Central, says the TND ordinances guarantee to local governments that any development that comes in will be a quality project. "These ordinances list all the amenities. They set high architectural standards. They limit the number of builders and set how much green space will be in a development," he says. "That appeals to me, how highly restrictive and coded they are."

Another issue is the rapidly increasing cost of land and the shortage of open space. TND developments allow for a higher density of people to live in an area. The trade-off: developers must make up for this density by providing amenities, such as parks and open space.

"Not only are we running out of land, but we don't have the road systems to support a lot of traffic," Kurz says.

Like anything, TNDs have drawbacks. For one, the price of a home in a development is higher than in the average subdivision. That's because of the costs of developing the land, along with all

the expensive touches, such as mature treescaping.

Darryl May of Darryl May Builders, who is building 10 houses in the Willow Grove TND off Perkins Road, says his houses will start at \$350,000, well above the average metro area home price. He expects the prices will take off quickly from their current rate of \$185 a square foot because of demand. "I've seen more interest from empty nesters than any other category," he says.

Despite the pricing, Oubre says there's not a typical buyer for homes in TNDs. The buyers run the gamut from empty nesters to first-time homebuyers, to renters.

May says the prices are justified because of the amenities people are getting from buying into a community.

"It's not just finding a home, you're buying a lifestyle," says May, who has started building the first of four houses in Willow Grove. "You can walk to a restaurant, a coffee shop or a little deli."

Oubre says one of the problems with TNDs is homes in the developments have become "collectors items," pricing them out of the range of many South Louisiana residents. He's working on alternatives to make the projects more affordable, including one proposed New Iberia development that would be done in conjunction with the Southern Mutual Help Association, a nonprofit that works with poor rural communities. In this development, housing subsidies would be offered to about one-third of the residents.

Some TNDs haven't developed as fast as originally planned. The Wall Street Journal cites McKenzietown near Calgary, Alberta, and Baldwin Park near Orlando as developments that experienced construction delays and slower-than-expected home sales. That could be a problem for developers or builders who don't have the deep pockets to ride out sluggish demand.

There have also been complaints that some TNDs can be too cookie-cutter looking. "If you visit nice developments, you realize the investment up front to really make a beautiful project," says DiResto. "As more people become familiar with these developments, they'll demand a higher standard and better pattern of growth."

Oubre says he's starting to see changes in TNDs. For a long time, the developments were based off of historic architectural styles such as Acadian, Creole or A. Hayes Town. Now there's been interest in building developments in a modern style--but that development may be a few years away from coming to Baton Rouge.

People in the local market expect TNDs to continue to grow in popularity. For one, in the past six months, several local governments, including Ascension, East Baton Rouge and West Baton Rouge parishes have passed TND ordinances, making it easier for the projects to get approval. Before the ordinances, developers had to get waivers for their projects because the concept of putting houses so close to one another and building pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods ran counter to existing zoning laws. Daigle, who developed River Ranch, and Richard Carmouche, who developed Willow Grove, had to each get more than 100 zoning waivers for their projects, covering everything from street widths to sidewalk locations.

Developers Jimmy Nunnally and Steele Pollard are planning The Village at Magnolia Square in Central, the first community which would be approved under the East Baton Rouge Parish ordinance. It's taken them about five months to get to the point where they're going before Central officials for permits for the 510-unit development. "It's really been a streamlined process," says Nunnally, noting that it's taken them longer to get an 81-lot subdivision approved in Slidell. If all goes well, the permits could be in hand by March 1, and the first lots should be on the market by the end of the year.

TNDs may seem like a tough sell in Baton Rouge, which architect Trula Remson calls "a city of sprawl." And it will be a few months before the first significant number of homes enter the market. But supporters say people are willing to forgo driving and live in a community where stores, restaurants and offices are within walking distance.

"There's been a shift in society," says Remson, whose firm, Remson Haley Herpin has designed the Edenborne TND in Gonzales. "People are more family-oriented, and there's a desire to live in a neighborhood where they do know their neighbors and their kids can go to school in the neighborhood. That's something a true TND can offer."

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