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Leaders say better transportation options can connect communities, people to jobs

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The head of the U.S. Department of Transportation said that urban planners and engineers have a chance to build transit systems that create opportunities for more people.

“We have an opportunity to make this generation of American transportation planning the most restorative in our history,” Anthony Foxx, secretary of the federal transportation department said Wednesday during his closing keynote address to the Louisiana Smart Growth Summit. The 10th annual summit was held Tuesday and Wednesday at the Shaw Center for the Arts in downtown Baton Rouge.

Foxx said there have been problems with highways, airports and rail lines “carving up neighborhoods” and leaving a bitter taste in the mouth of residents. “Instead of a lifeline, transportation became a wall,” he said.



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The new thinking is building transportation networks that bring opportunities for jobs and a better life to people, instead of cutting them off. One technical assistance program launched by the agency is LadderSTEP, which seeks to connect people to jobs, build transportation infrastructure and revitalize distressed neighborhoods.

In April, Baton Rouge was one of seven cities selected by the Federal Transit Authority to participate in LadderSTEP and get technical assistance for developing a streetcar line connecting LSU and downtown. The first meeting with federal officials was held Wednesday.

Michael Townes, a rail and transit market sector leader for HNTB, a Virginia-based engineering firm working on several projects in Baton Rouge, said officials with the FTA see the LSU to downtown streetcar line as a “showcase project.”

“This could be a national template for implementing a streetcar line and the economic development benefits in a medium-sized community,” Townes said.

Chris Leinberger, a professor at George Washington University and president of LOCUS, a coalition of developers who advocate for walkable communities, said the proposed streetcar could be done relatively cheaply and would lead to an “explosion of growth” on the two blocks on either side of the line. The cost of a 7.38-mile streetcar line running from the State Capitol to Tiger Stadium has been pegged at about \$100 million.

Much of the discussion during the summit dealt with the change toward creating walkable communities, something that has lagged in Baton Rouge, where development is still largely dominated by unconnected subdivisions of single-family homes.

Leinberger said LSU could be a catalyst in changing the Baton Rouge landscape.

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“LSU has a lot of land, and millennials want to live in high-density walking spaces,” he said. “There’s no reason that your university couldn’t build an academic village with housing for faculty, staff and students.” The University of California, Irvine, which is located in an area with high housing prices did a similar program, partnering with a nonprofit agency to build affordable units for students and faculty, Leinberger said.

Another public transportation project discussed at the summit was the passenger rail line linking Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Knox Ross, secretary-treasurer of the Southern Rail Commission, an agency set up to promote rail service, said the cities that are succeeding and growing have made tremendous commitments to rail. That includes places across the political spectrum from Austin, Texas, to Salt Lake City.

“These are amenities young people want,” Ross said.

Efforts to bring passenger rail to the region are gaining momentum. Both state Rep. John Bel Edwards and U.S. Sen. David Vitter, the two candidates for governor, have said they would support a rail line connecting Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Ross said there’s a study about extending Amtrak service from New Orleans to Orlando, Florida, and talk about creating a line along the Interstate 20 corridor linking Dallas-Fort Worth with Meridian, Mississippi.

“So many of our cities are losing air service, they’re at a competitive disadvantage,” Ross said. Rail service allows communities to tie themselves to a larger metro area like New Orleans, Dallas or Orlando.

John Spain, executive vice president of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, said a play book has been developed to help Edwards or Vitter establish rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans during their first term as governor.

“We have an opportunity,” he said.

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