

A Discussion on Growth

There has been considerable discussion in the community regarding whether we need to have new housing and new subdivisions. These discussions are good as they will lead us to make better decisions about the future of our Parish, provided that we base those discussions on facts and avoid the personal attacks which have characterized some of the discussion thus far. We can disagree without being disagreeable.

As a proponent of growth for our Parish, I feel it is important for me to explain my position as to why I believe that we must be welcoming to growth. This growth will provide an impetus to economic development and the overall economic health of the community.

It might be useful if we can look at two definitions for terms that are at the core of this discussion.

Economic Development

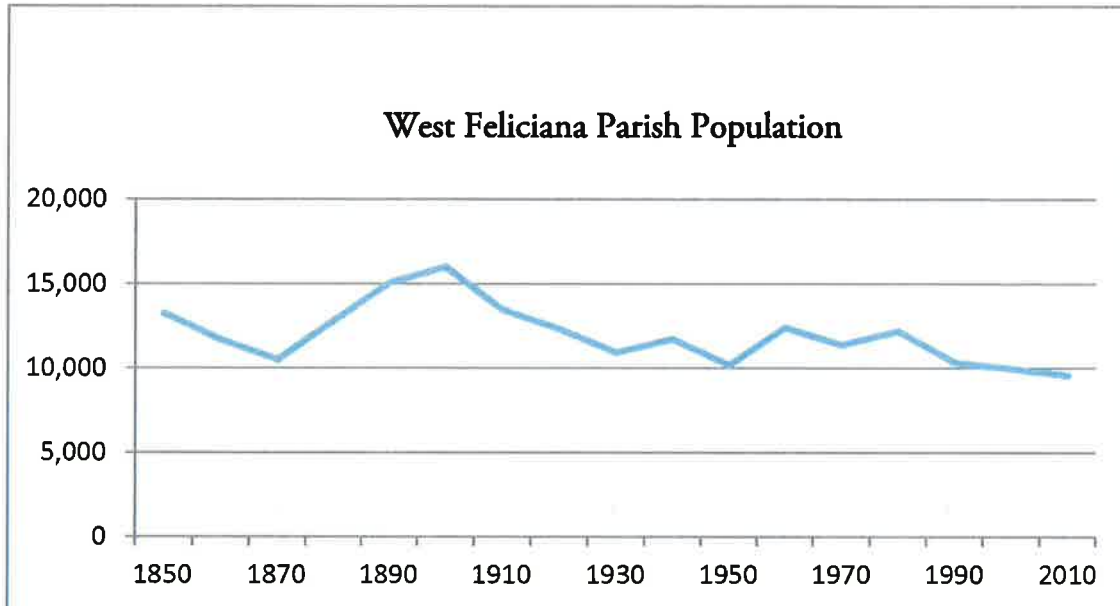
The scope of economic development includes the process and policies by which a nation (or state or other political subdivision) improves the economic, political, and social wellbeing of its people.

Smart Growth

Smart growth is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in compact urban centers to avoid sprawl. It also advocates compact, transit-oriented, bicycle-friendly land use, including neighborhood schools, complete streets, and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices.

Population Growth / Decline

At the core of West Feliciana's problems economically is the long-term decline of our population. Since 1890, the population of West Feliciana has declined on a steady basis. This decline in residents means that we have fewer shoppers, less students, fewer taxpayers and fewer volunteers to bring vitality to the community. It makes us unattractive to businesses that need growth in their own markets to make operating their business attractive.



More troubling, in the recent decade where the Greater Baton Rouge region has grown in excess of both State and National Averages, West Feliciana Parish continued its population decline.

Ultimately this population decline saps the vitality out of a community. Our businesses cannot succeed because they have fewer customers, when those businesses close we export our residents and their taxes to other areas to shop.

Look around the next time you are shopping in Zachary or New Roads, say hello to your neighbors and goodbye to your sales tax dollars which that could be used to fix roads, build infrastructure and improve schools here in West Feliciana.

A Bedroom Community without Bedrooms

The majority of West Feliciana residents work outside of the Parish. West Feliciana is their home, but not the location of their business or workplace. This is not a factor that can be easily changed. However securing new employment opportunities for our residents is an integral component of economic development.

More troubling, the vast majority of people who work in West Feliciana live elsewhere, primarily Mississippi, Zachary, Point Coupee and Baton Rouge. **Why do they make the choice to live elsewhere?** A variety of reasons, including more amenities, closer to family or retail, a desire for more convenient services and other personal choices.

A major factor in their decision that we must correct as a community is to assist the private sector in building a more robust inventory of available homes in the price categories that are most desirable to attract young and growing families to our Parish.

Smart Growth in West Feliciana

As a believer in Smart Growth, I have pushed for the school system to put its property in the back of St. Francisville on the market in an attempt to create more dense housing in an area that has existing infrastructure (i.e., roads, water, sewer.) It makes sense and it is sustainable and economical. It will take a piece of property that is an eyesore and an environmental hazard and that is a financial drain on the School System and turn it into a set of lovely homes that are tax payers who contribute to the running of our schools, our town and our Parish.

Smart Growth also includes “mixed use developments and a wide range of housing choices.” Those will include Estate sized lots (10 acres or better) as well as more moderately priced options that young families can enjoy. That generally means a four bedroom, two and one half bath for somewhere between \$275,000 and \$375,000.

Given the price of land in West Feliciana this means that lot sizes need to be smaller and have less of an impact on the overall cost of the house.

We should recognize that some individuals want something different in the way of their residence. Few people are lucky enough to live on hundreds of acres. Some can afford ten to twenty acres. Most people either choose to live on less land or cannot afford the size that they want. As a Parish, do we really want to tell them that they aren't welcome? Particularly as many of these folks are young, including many of the young people who grew up in West Feliciana and would like to provide their children the same lifestyle as was part of their childhood.

Why don't we have new houses and subdivisions?

Is it because people don't want to live here? If you ask a local realtor and they will tell you that demand for housing in our area remains high, particularly in the young family, starter home market. West Feliciana is a highly desirable place to live, and raise a family. We have great schools, recreational and outdoor activities and many other amenities that make it a desirable place to live.

Some folks in our community express a belief that growth and development will destroy or severely damage the qualities that make this place special. Of equal

importance is that when a community loses its economic vitality it begins to crumble. There are numerous examples of this throughout rural Louisiana where first the population goes, then the schools and infrastructure and finally a community becomes a hallowed-out shell of its once rich history.

Impact on Economic Development

Unfortunately, in the interest of protecting our community over the years we have created a distinct impression among many in our surrounding areas who might want to invest here that they aren't welcome or that the rules will not be adhered to in an even fashion. This reputation impacts not only those who wish to build real estate developments but, as importantly, companies looking for a location to build their business.

The industrial development component of economic development is a long-term activity that requires first that a community be viewed as friendly and accepting of new activity, second that it have the human and other resources for the company to be successful.

Balance is Important

Developers of both housing and new businesses need to have confidence that the rules of a community will be fair, applied evenly and not subject to political whim. The interest of those who want growth to be carefully managed and those who want a more open environment can create a level of discussion that is positive for both sides as long as we realize that uncertainty in our rules and their application will cause people looking to make an investment to go elsewhere.

Parish government and numerous volunteers have spent an enormous amount of time and effort to put in place planning and zoning rules and regulations that balance the interests of the community while providing potential investors in the Parish with a fair and clear system of regulation. The recent controversy surrounding a new subdivision on Hwy 966 helped to identify many remaining issues in the zoning regulations that need to be corrected so that everyone can have confidence that the system is fair and will be applied evenly.

Some folks are against growth of any kind. While everyone's opinion is worthwhile, if we let people against growth continue to drive the discussion and actions of our Parish we will all suffer from the lack of economic activity. Choices have been made in the past that still have negative consequences on our community and the perception others have of us that limits the opportunity for growth.

We need to be a community that uses its well-known and well-deserved reputation for hospitality and friendliness to create a welcoming climate for growth. New people and new businesses will bring a vitality we need and we will be able to build the kind of community that we all want. Lets take the best from our history and build a bright future for our children.