



Everything New Orleans

## On the West Bank, planners lay a path forward out of traffic congestion

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Dorree Magiera has lived for 22 years off Manhattan Boulevard, in the Stonebridge neighborhood on the West Bank of **Jefferson Parish**. And over the years, steady as the grass growing, traffic has backed up Magiera's long commute all the way to Metairie.

At the Thursday (June 26) **meeting of the West Jefferson Civic Coalition**, Magiera was one of a dozen residents who came out to a meeting devoted to transportation issues in the area, and found herself drawn to maps that showed projects underway and in the planning stages. "It's good to see the lines on the paper, and the commitments being made," Magiera said. "I wanted to see how things are progressing in the region."

The meeting hosted representatives from the **Regional Planning Commission**, which acts as a liaison between federal funds and local planners, directing federal money where it is most needed and ensuring that local entities meet federal guidelines. Regional Planning Commission chief Walter Brooks addressed a crowd of West Bank residents and officials, urging them to share the transportation problems they see. "In a sense, you're really helping us do a better job in the future," Brooks said. "That's how projects develop. They come from elected officials -- yes; from department heads -- yes; and from the public as well."

"We're interested in building a better community and hopefully we can sit around the table with you," he said.

West Jefferson Civic Coalition president Oscar Pipkins said he relished the opportunity to voice West Bank concerns. "We want to give the West Bank public the opportunity to have a voice and provide feedback," Pipkins said. Right now, Pipkins said poor traffic planning may be preventing the development of the area. "We need to have transportation that will provide encouragement to people to move to the West Bank."

Brooks said that one of the major concerns that the commission has gauged in the community is what he called "connectivity": "They want interconnectivity across parish lines people want to be able to get to work."

To that end, a Regional Planning Commission project unveiled earlier this month is designed to improve

traffic flow between the east and the West Bank, by alleviating congestion on the **Lake Pontchartrain Expressway**. The Commission is working to add back a third lane of traffic and add "ramp meters" at some entries to the highway in downtown New Orleans. The meters are traffic signals which flash at a regular tempo, to allow one car every two seconds. They are not designed to slow oncoming traffic, but to space it out evenly.

Pipkins said the Civic Coalition is supportive of the improvements, while still skeptical of ramp meters. "We're not dreaming of ramp meters. I still have to be sold on that." Brooks described the meters simply, pointing at a door at the auditorium in the West Jefferson Medical Center, where the meeting took place. "Look," Brooks said. "If all of us tried to run through that door not many of us would get through."

Grace Morris, Campaign Organizer of the Gulf Restoration Network, addressed Brooks with concerns about potential environmental hazards caused if **Plaquemines Parish permits a new coal export facility** -- the first in the area to transport coal using the rail lines that now sweep through Gretna. "People on the West Bank are not aware of it and their concerns have not been heard," Morris said.

Brooks said that the Regional Planning Commission was moving forward with an environmental study of the impact of the coal trains. He said that the public would be involved at every step. "There will be public meetings in this process," Brooks said.

Brooks' presentation included a complete rundown of how funds collected by the Crescent City Connection tolls, in combination with federal funds, are being budgeted to address West Bank transport projects. As well, he gave a rundown of Regional Planning Commissions already in the works to address congestion on West Bank thoroughfares. Major projects include drainage improvements on Ames Boulevard, the completion of two separate projects to widen Lapalco Boulevard and Harvey Boulevard; and the creation of an exit and extension tying U.S.-90 to Peters Road and widening Peters Road to four lanes.

In the audience was Councilman Ricky Templet, who said he has been pushing forward the plan to widen both Peters Road and Harvey Boulevard, so that Peters Road becomes a valuable north-south connector that takes the pressure off of Manhattan Boulevard. That project would expressly solve the dilemma faced by Doree Magiera, of Stoneridge, when she tries to get to work in Metairie.

"We're trying to look at the whole picture," Templet said.

Herbert Dunbar, a 35-year resident of Gretna, came to the meeting to seize what he saw as a new opportunity: an opportunity for concerns from West Bank residents to be taken seriously by planners. Ever since voters turned down continued tolls on the Crescent City Connector, Dunbar felt the West Bank had been accepted as a strong voice. "We as West Bank stood up for the tolls, and they won't take us lightly again," Dunbar said. "Do not ever overlook the West Bank again."

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