



# Baton Rouge Area Chamber®

David E. Roberts Center for Economic Development

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## Baton Rouge Area Chamber 2023 Statewide Agenda and Election Platform

Louisiana has become an outlier among Southern states regarding population and job growth. Since the start of 2016, the state is alone across the South for having lost population and jobs, over 90,000 residents and 3,000 jobs. To put the growth rates of our peers into perspective, had Louisiana just grown at the average rate of other Southern states, it would have 239,000 more jobs and 301,000 additional residents.

From an economic development perspective, we rely on Louisiana's elected officials to create the direction and trajectory for our state and region by creating a pro-growth environment where people and businesses prosper. Decisions made by the legislators and the newly elected governor will shape Louisiana's future for years, and it will require bold action to advance the state and generate the growth and prosperity that our Southern peer states have experienced.

Unfortunately, Louisiana's disappointing population and job growth rankings, alarming poverty and incarceration rates, transportation infrastructure woes, and educational and workforce challenges reflect a longstanding narrative of policy missteps.

The state and region's future hinges on making bold, transformative policy decisions on salient issues like education, economic development, fiscal policy, infrastructure, sustainability, and crime for Louisiana to shift from a narrative of despair to one where its residents genuinely thrive. As we look forward to another legislative election, BRAC is excited to introduce a comprehensive and future-focused platform. This platform is not just a set of policies; it is centered around fundamental principles and bold recommendations that address pressing challenges and seize growth opportunities.

In this election, BRAC urges candidates for legislative and gubernatorial races to adopt the following seven strategies and embrace these recommendations necessary to achieve them.

1. Turbocharge Louisiana's economic development efforts.
2. Accelerate transportation infrastructure solutions.
3. Prepare and propel learners into high-wage employment.
4. Improve the state's tax climate.
5. Enhance statewide public safety efforts.
6. Improve the insurance environment.
7. Promote cleanliness and beautification and buoy resilience efforts.

### 1) Turbocharge Louisiana's economic development efforts.

#### Recommendations:



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- Redesign and reorganize LED into a more aggressive state economic development agency, fashioned on the best state economic development agencies, and competitive with the fastest growing states in the US. Support existing Louisiana companies while attracting business investments in industry sectors poised for more rapid growth that diversifies the state's economy.
- The State of Louisiana woefully underfunds project-ready sites as a part of its economic development sites prep program. Invest at least \$100 million into a sites program to develop certified sites across the state over the next four years.
- Position the deep-water ports of Louisiana for more competition for international trade.
- Increase support for entrepreneurs, innovation, and small business growth, through low regulation and paperwork, counseling and peer mentoring programs, incentives and grants into research and development, and access to growth capital.
- Expand state programs that drive minority business development and growth.
- Ensure Louisiana's talent programs, such as LED FastStart, are the best in the nation and expand their services to existing businesses in every region of Louisiana.
- Support carbon capture utilization and sequestration and ensure EPA Primacy over Class VI wells is properly and transparently established by the responsible state agencies.

Lawmakers must create bold and innovative solutions to remedy the state's job and population loss trends. This requires a deep understanding of every metropolitan region's economy, their best sectors for growth, their best sites for investment, and collaboration with local leaders to build talent and quality of life to attract new investment.

Burgeoning industries poised for explosive growth, like transitional energy and life sciences, require significant attention and could potentially create thousands of jobs while diversifying the state's economy. LED and state leaders should target companies in these sectors more directly, create new incentive programs where necessary, improve the predictability and transparency of existing programs, and build the talent and workforce to compete nationally for investment. In the Baton Rouge Area, sectors such as software development, renewable and transitional energy, life sciences and health tech are promising opportunities to diversify and grow for the future.

Efforts to grow existing businesses in Louisiana, known as Business Retention and Expansion, can lead to new jobs and investment staying in Louisiana and a readily available strategy in every parish. LED must increase its partnership in collaboration with local economic development organizations to connect to every economic driver to support their needs for infrastructure, workforce, and creative solutions to challenges.

Site development has also become a vital tool to attract companies. Indiana maintains a



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\$150 million program while Mississippi invests \$58 million, and Virginia added \$90 million to their site programs last year. Louisiana must be more aggressive in investing in economic development sites. In the 2022 session, the legislature approved the state's most significant recent one-time investment into economic development sites by appropriating \$8 million, a good step but far short of the visionary, transformative investments that can catalyze substantial economic development project activity.

Finally, Louisiana can create jobs at high-growth companies by supporting the entrepreneurs inventing the future. The state must invest in innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystems, providing start-ups and small businesses with the tools they need to thrive.

### **2) Accelerate transportation infrastructure solutions.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- Fund and complete all three phases of the I-10 widening project in East and West Baton Rouge Parishes.
- Fully fund the new Mississippi River Bridge and fund construction of the connecting corridors, LA 1 and LA 30.
- Complete the needed infrastructure upgrades and operational agreements to start the Baton Rouge to New Orleans passenger rail system, connecting through communities such as Ascension, Jefferson, and LaPlace along the corridor.
- Fund Louisiana's transportation construction and maintenance budgets at levels competitive with the top ten states in the US and ensure the Transportation Trust Fund has the required revenue to build and maintain our infrastructure.
- Support new toll financing as a user fee to generate revenue toward the public-private partnership (PPP) sources needed to accomplish projects like the new Mississippi River Bridge.

Over the last 20 years, population growth in Louisiana's Capital Region has exceeded the capacity of its transportation infrastructure, and consequently, it has consistently ranked as one of the worst places for congestion in the country. Lawmakers have made progress toward increasing transportation capacity by providing an initial funding source for a new Mississippi River Bridge, funding the first phase of the Interstate 10 widening through the Baton Rouge core, and pushing for passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The business community will look to the next governor and legislature to fund these projects through to completion by protecting existing funding, providing future appropriations, completing their regulatory approvals expeditiously, supporting tolls, and seeking other sources of project funds.

### **3) Prepare and propel learners into high-wage employment.**

#### **Recommendations:**



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- Expand workforce education programs, career exposure, and work-based learning in K-12 programs and create new high school work-based learning incentives for employers. The state's goal should be that every high school student not bound for a four-year college ends high school with work experience and/or dual enrollment credits/credentials toward a career.
- Fully fund universal early childhood education for three- and four-year-olds.
- Increase access to post-secondary credit and credentials for high school students and full transferability of college credits across Louisiana higher education programs.
- Update the state accountability system to properly account for student growth and career-oriented education in school performance scores.
- Focus secondary and post-secondary curricula toward skills and competency needs of emerging industries and the economy.
- Reorganize the Louisiana Workforce Commission and local boards to focus on economic demands and align to target sectors in every region of Louisiana.
- Address state charter school policy to match student enrollment practices at traditional and magnet schools.
- Ensure inter-agency data sharing agreement between K-12, higher education, and workforce commission to improve student pathways from education to careers.

One of the core priorities for BRAC is talent development, from the youngest pre-kindergarten learners to seasoned professionals looking to polish their skill sets. Unfortunately, educational trends in Louisiana paint a bleak picture throughout the educational continuum. According to the National Science Foundation, Louisiana [spends less per student on higher education](#) per full-time student than any other state in the south and the fifth least in the nation. Meanwhile, for the state's youngest learners, only 49.6 percent of K-3 students are reading on grade level.

We must invest in talent development at all levels by funding universal access to high-quality early childhood education for children from birth to three and press for massive improvements in K-12 outcomes. Finally, Louisiana should become the national leader in helping students prepare for careers by giving every interested student access to job experience while in high school and early college.

#### **4) Improve the state's tax climate.**

##### **Recommendations:**

- Eliminate the Franchise Tax.
- Centralize state sales tax collection.
- Reduce the corporate and personal income tax rates.
- Give local governments more control over property taxes, allowing the state to reduce its tax burden.



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The Tax Foundation ranks Louisiana 39th in its index of state tax climates. The state's tax structure makes it difficult for businesses to operate and harder for businesses to grow due to the increased burden it creates compared to our peer states. Recent efforts have successfully improved the state business and personal income tax structure, but more is needed. We also must establish a budgetary and fiscal environment that will make Louisiana competitive with other states for new business investment and talent by reducing complexity and ensuring predictability across our tax system.

### **5) Enhance statewide public safety efforts.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- Provide \$20 million in funding for the State Police DNA Lab to increase investigation capacity and shorten timelines to securing evidence.
- Ensure the implementation of ACT 374 of 2023, creating stronger accountability on the companies and devices employed to monitor defendants.
- Support vocational education and workforce re-entry programs for incarcerated Louisianians.
- Expand joint efforts between federal, state, and local criminal justice entities to address violent crime hotspots.

Louisiana currently has three of the top ten most violent cities in America: Shreveport, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge. Violent crime takes a toll on a community's well-being and perception, and these, and even Louisiana's rural communities, have been reeling. Reducing violent crime is paramount to ensuring Louisiana citizens' safety and maintaining our communities' integrity and well-being.

Achieving a significant reduction in violent crime requires the collective efforts of lawmakers, law enforcement, educators, social service providers, and local communities. We call on legislators to comprehensively address violent crime's root causes and immediate effects through informed legislation, federal, state, and local law enforcement collaborations, and strategic investments, aiming for a substantial reduction in the incidence and impact of violent activities.

### **6) Improve the insurance environment.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- Continually fund resiliency grants for property owners.
- Ensure building standards in south Louisiana are high enough for structures to withstand hurricanes.
- Create statutory trigger language for when insurers receive satisfactory proof of loss.
- Eliminate outlier fees or penalties on insurers in the state.



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- Support federal efforts to address out-of-control Flood Insurance costs.
- For auto insurance claims, allow insurers to pay medical costs directly to doctors and require reversionary trusts for future medical payments.
- Provide regular, independent analysis on why property and car insurance rates are high and recommendations to lower costs.

Louisiana residents have faced exorbitant insurance rates, limited coverage options, and challenges accessing quality insurance services for too long. We recognize that a thriving insurance market is crucial not only for personal protection and business continuity but also for the state's economic health. Louisiana also has the sixth most personal injury cases per capita and has a reputation for being litigious, which hinders economic development efforts. Property, flood, and auto insurance rates hamper our businesses' ability to grow and drain their resources. Our residents and businesses must have access to affordable, comprehensive insurance to safeguard their future and at prices that won't discourage asset ownership.

### **7) Promote cleanliness and beautification, and buoy resilience efforts.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- Implement stricter maintenance and repair standards for interstates and prime corridors.
- Address litter along interstates and state highways, requiring grass cutters to pick up trash when mowing adjacent grass, contractors to clean shoulders following auto accidents, and expanding business "Adopt-A-Highway" programs.
- Enact more robust blight reduction policies.
- Support and expand incentives for historic redevelopment and blighted property reinvestment.
- Incorporate statewide complete streets policies and practices.
- Fund coastal protection and flood mitigation efforts to ensure communities can withstand 100-year storm events.

Quality of place plays a pivotal role in driving the growth and prosperity of a state. It encompasses various aspects of the physical, environmental, economic, and cultural setting that collectively contribute to the overall well-being of its residents and attractiveness to outsiders.

States and regions with a strong quality of place provide well-maintained infrastructure, environmental resiliency, efficient public services, and recreational opportunities, all of which contribute to a higher standard of living, growth, and prosperity.



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