

Greauxing Resilience at Home

City of Gonzales, Louisiana:
Gonzales Comprehensive Plan



GEORGETOWN CLIMATE CENTER

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Louisiana is one of the hardest-hit areas in the United States as extreme weather events and regular flooding become more frequent and intense.¹ These challenges often fall “first and worst” on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color or “BIPOC” and low-income communities.² This is especially true in the U.S. Gulf Coast region and the state of Louisiana.

Over time, these challenges are being exacerbated by population increases and transitions as climate and non-climate drivers (e.g., people moving out of urban centers into more rural areas) influence where people choose — or are able — to live.

In southeast Louisiana, resilient, affordable housing initiatives are critical to ensuring equitable adaptation that takes into consideration the myriad overlapping challenges facing all Louisianans, but especially those living in communities that have long borne a disproportionate burden of risk.

Over a two-year period between fall 2020 and spring 2022, **Capital Region Planning Commission** and **Georgetown Climate Center** partnered with dozens of people from government, private, and nonprofit sectors and community stakeholders in Region Seven of the **Louisiana Watershed Initiative**.³ The result of that partnership effort is **Greauxing Resilience at Home: A Regional Vision**⁴ (Regional Vision), a resource to inform Region Seven’s ongoing work to increase community resilience by promoting affordable housing and nature-based solutions.

Regional and local governments in Region Seven can use the Regional Vision to identify potential legal, planning, and policy tools and projects to increase the affordability and availability of housing and the use of nature-based solutions. In addition, the Regional Vision offers insights for policymakers across Louisiana, throughout the Gulf Coast region, and nationally.

This report is composed of 24 individual case studies developed by Georgetown Climate Center to support the Regional Vision. These case studies describe best and emerging practices, tools, and examples from Louisiana and other U.S. jurisdictions to make progress on these complex and challenging issues. These case studies are intended to provide transferable lessons and ideas for regional and local governments addressing housing and mitigating flood risk as integrated parts of comprehensive community resilience strategies. Collectively, these case studies present a suite, although not an exhaustive list of tools and approaches that can be used to facilitate any of these efforts.

1 STATE OF LA., LOUISIANA CLIMATE ACTION PLAN: CLIMATE INITIATIVES TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNOR 15–16 (Feb. 2022), available at <https://gov.louisiana.gov/assets/docs/CCI-Task-force/CAP/ClimateActionPlanFinal.pdf>.

2 See *id.* at 15–17.

3 The Louisiana Watershed Initiative is an effort to create a paradigm shift in floodplain management towards a strategy that approaches flood risk reduction from a nature-based solutions and land-use-based approach. A part of this approach includes identifying eight separate regional watershed management areas to assist in achieving cross-jurisdictional activities.

Region Seven is one of these eight watershed regions. Region Seven encompasses the upper part of the toe of Louisiana’s boot. It spans eastward from the Mississippi River near Baton Rouge across the Northshore (i.e., north of Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas) to Mississippi and along the Mississippi River to the Bonnet Carré Spillway. The region includes 13 parishes and 45 incorporated municipalities.

4 To reflect their connection to Louisiana’s cultural heritage, the project team and members of Region Seven that participated in this process chose to use the word “Greaux,” a French-inspired phonetic spelling of the word “Grow,” to brand this product.

Where possible, all the case studies share a consistent organizational format to allow easier cross-comparison of tools, processes, and takeaways:

- The **Background** section introduces the regional and local context (e.g., location, demographics) for each case study, including the following facing each jurisdiction: extreme weather risks, housing and environmental challenges, and development pressures.
- The **Housing** section focuses on the legal, planning, and policy tools and projects that have been designed and implemented to support the growth and preservation of housing affordability and availability.
- The **Environment** section highlights how vulnerable habitats like floodplains and other open spaces are being restored, conserved, and protected as a part of comprehensive resilience strategies to provide important ecosystem and community benefits like reducing flood risk and creating community assets, such as parks and trails.
- The **Community Engagement** section summarizes how governments have provided different types of public engagement opportunities and how affected residents have contributed to these planning and decisionmaking processes.
- The **Funding** section identifies how the programs, plans, and projects discussed have been funded by federal, state, and local government and private and nongovernmental sources.
- The **Next Steps** section captures the anticipated future actions that featured case study jurisdictions may take in implementing these tools and strategies.
- The **Considerations and Lessons Learned** section concludes with the primary takeaways from each example that other regional and local policymakers and communities may consider when developing or implementing their own housing and resilience strategies using these legal, planning, and policy tools.

A few additional notes about the case studies:

- **The case studies selected prioritize relatable and scalable models from places similar to Louisiana:** Wherever possible, Georgetown Climate Center aimed to acknowledge and lift up the work of jurisdictions and nongovernmental actors in Region Seven and neighboring watershed regions to inspire peer-to-peer sharing and actions from as close to home as possible. These resources are drawn from 12 states, with an emphasis on regions and local areas in the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic: Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Examples and lessons drawn from these regions are easiest to apply to a Louisianan context because they feature similar geography or analogous impacts from flooding and other climate effects.
- **There are no perfect, “one-size-fits-all” solutions:** While the case studies and resource entries informing the Region Vision are instructive for Region Seven and beyond, none of them are “perfect” examples of how to solve these complex and challenging issues. Georgetown Climate Center found no single case study or resource that provides a point-for-point or model for what Region Seven is trying to accomplish. No other jurisdiction identified is currently trying to integrate housing, flooding, equity, resilience, and population changes together in a single plan, ordinance, or policy. However, some jurisdictions are moving in that direction, or are making progress on discrete elements of what will eventually become a more holistic strategy. Therefore, this report and the Regional Vision draw analogous connections and recommendations that can be combined to facilitate more comprehensive planning and land-use efforts.

The case studies in this report were informed by interviews with practitioners and community leaders in charge of designing and overseeing this work. No statements or opinions, however, should be attributed to any individual or organization included in the *Acknowledgements* section of this report.

It is also important to note that the examples described in each case study are ongoing and the content included in this report is current as of spring 2022. For future updates about these and other case studies and the Regional Vision, please visit [Greaxing Resilience at Home: A Regional Vision](#) and Georgetown Climate Center’s [Adaptation Clearinghouse](#).

City of Gonzales, Louisiana

Gonzales Comprehensive Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Gonzales, Louisiana is located in the eastern part of Ascension Parish and centrally located between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.¹ Facing increasing retail and commercial development, the city updated its local comprehensive plan to accommodate rapid growth.

The Gonzales Comprehensive Plan was created in collaboration with Gonzales's residents, city staff, various stakeholders, and Gonzales's elected officials.² In the plan, the city presents a clear strategic framework for the future growth of Gonzales.³ The city addresses Gonzales's land use and urban design, mobility and transportation, housing, economy, quality of life and city services, and redevelopment of its downtown area.⁴ The plan's affordable housing considerations include diversifying the options and affordability of the housing stock in Gonzales. The plan's environmental considerations include emphasizing the city's green spaces and community amenities and benefits, and reducing future flood risk/building overall community resilience.

The plan is an example of a local comprehensive plan that addresses growth, while also balancing community needs and environmental conservation in an increasingly suburban area that is experiencing high demands for new development.

BACKGROUND

The City of Gonzales is located in the eastern part of Ascension Parish.⁵ Gonzales is a relatively small city with about 10,957 people residing there as of 2019 and has a majority of Black

¹ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., Gonzales Comprehensive Plan 24 (2015), available at https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf; *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan*, CTR. FOR PLANNING EXCELLENCE, <https://www.cpex.org/gonzales> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

² *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan*, CTR. FOR PLANNING EXCELLENCE, <https://www.cpex.org/gonzales> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

³ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., Gonzales Comprehensive Plan 9, 14 (2015), available at https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf.

⁴ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., Gonzales Comprehensive Plan 5 (2015), available at https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf; *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan*, CTR. FOR PLANNING EXCELLENCE, <https://www.cpex.org/gonzales> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

⁵ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., Gonzales Comprehensive Plan 24 (2015), available at https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf.

residents.⁶ Gonzales has 2,157 acres of developed land.⁷ About half of the city's developed land is used for residential purposes (a majority single-family housing), while the other half is used for commercial and industrial purposes.⁸

Ascension Parish is rapidly developing and Gonzales itself is located between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.⁹ Thus, the city has had to plan to confront this growth, especially to balance residential and commercial growth with environmental conservation.¹⁰

OVERVIEW OF THE GONZALES COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Gonzales Comprehensive Plan presents a strategic framework for the future development of Gonzales.¹¹ It encompasses a vision of Gonzales articulated by many of its citizens and provides the city with comprehensive guidelines for development.¹²

The plan was developed for the City of Gonzales. Specifically, it was prepared by the Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX), with support from DRW Planning Studio and ECONorthwest.¹³ The plan was officially released in August 2015, and both the City of Gonzales Planning and Zoning Commission and the Gonzales City Council adopted the plan that same month.¹⁴

The city's previous comprehensive plan was released in 1997 and did not take into consideration the rapid development that has taken place since then, in addition to future development in Gonzales.¹⁵ The 2015 plan includes various predictions of population growth in Gonzales, which are based on demographics and local trends. The city predicts that Gonzales could have an annual average growth rate of three percent.¹⁶ This means that there would be about 8,728 new residents by 2035 and about 3,583 new households will be needed by this time.¹⁷ To compare, from 2000

⁶ *Gonzales City, Louisiana, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU* (July 1, 2019), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/gonzalescitylouisiana>.

⁷ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan 44* (2015), *available at* https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan*, CTR. FOR PLANNING EXCELLENCE, <https://www.cplex.org/gonzales> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan 20* (2015), *available at* https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan* (2015), *available at* https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* at 9, 14.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 36.

¹⁷ *Id.*

and 2013, Gonzales's annual average growth rate was only at about 1.8 percent.¹⁸ For future growth, the city hopes to preserve its local character and culture while also offering a high quality of life to its current and future residents.¹⁹ Notably, the plan includes a "Vision Map" to illustrate what the Gonzales of the future can look like in terms of where the city will direct future land use in the face of anticipated population growth.²⁰

At the start of the plan, guiding principles that represent the core values of Gonzales residents and stakeholders are listed.²¹ The principles generally have a focus on equity and preserving local character in the face of growth and new development (e.g., "Provide a range of housing types for people of all income levels from high-end to affordable" and "Ensure quality new development that is balanced to provide a healthy community").²² The plan's guidelines are then organized into five sections: (1) Land Use and Community Character; (2) Downtown: The Heart of Gonzales; (3) Transportation; (4) Housing and Neighborhoods; and (5) Prosperous Economy.

Each section is further broken down into more discrete outcomes, goals, and actions. Outcomes are defined as "the big ideas that support the citizen's vision. They capture big picture changes that must occur to implement the plan."²³ Goals are defined as those used to "establish specific, measurable, attainable and realistic objectives that guide plan implementation by ensuring that stakeholders are clear about what must happen to move Gonzales toward the vision."²⁴ Lastly, actions are defined as those that "delineate the steps needed to achieve the goals."²⁵ Overall, the plan has 19 outcomes, 54 goals, and 155 actions.

The plan features an emphasis on affordable housing and environmental considerations across all five sections reflecting an interdisciplinary look at future development to guide comprehensive decisionmaking in the face of continued growth in an increasingly suburbanized area.

Regarding affordable housing, the plan has one outcome, two goals, and five action items. The outcome, goals, and actions recognize that Gonzales needs more affordable housing and presents steps for breaking down the barriers to creating affordable housing in Gonzales.

Regarding the environment, the plan has five goals and 12 action items. The goals and actions recognize that Gonzales has many environmental amenities. The plan outlines ways the city can develop in floodplains while minimizing flood risk and environmental consequences, capturing stormwater, and maintaining and increasing access to open and natural areas.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at 9.

²⁰ *Id.* at 8.

²¹ *Id.* at 5.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.* at 56, 82, 102, 120, 136.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

The affordable housing and environmental foci of the plan are discussed in more detail in subsequent parts.

HOUSING

Even prior to accounting for new growth, the city begins its housing characterization in the plan by explicitly acknowledging ongoing challenges. The plan provides that there is a lack of affordable and rental housing in Gonzales.²⁶ Specifically, around 70 percent of rental households are cost burdened.²⁷ In other words, these households pay 30 percent or more of their overall income to housing. Additionally, around one-fourth of households earn less than \$25,000 per year. This means that these households cannot afford fair market rent (i.e., \$752 for a two-bedroom dwelling).

In the plan, the city emphasizes the deficit in the amount of land that is appropriately zoned for future multifamily housing development, in addition to a lack of opportunity for the development of diverse housing options.²⁸ The city explains that Gonzales needs more affordable housing options of all kinds to address the housing crisis, and this need will only increase with time.²⁹ The plan suggests that high-density housing developments allow for more housing units and lower cost to taxpayers.³⁰ Furthermore, it “spreads out the cost of land among more homes” while creating more affordable housing options.³¹

With that background, one relevant guiding principle in the plan is to “[p]rovide a range of housing types for people of all income levels from high-end to affordable.”³² Building on this guiding principle in the Land Use and Community Character section, the following action items for affordable housing are listed, which fall under different outcomes and goals:

1. *Provide more housing choices, such as townhomes, smaller units, and affordable housing for youth, retail workers, and the aging population,*³³
2. *Identify barriers to multifamily and affordable housing development in the development code,*³⁴ and

²⁶ *Id.* at 114.

²⁷ *Id.* at 37.

²⁸ *Id.* at 114.

²⁹ *Id.* at 115.

³⁰ *Id.* at 118.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 5.

³³ *Id.* at 56.

³⁴ *Id.* at 57.

3. *Identify and implement programs to encourage affordable home ownership and owner occupancy in areas with high concentrations of rental single-family housing.*³⁵

In addition, in the Housing section of the plan, the city provides for similar and related goals around affordable housing:

1. *Identify barriers to multifamily and affordable housing development in the zoning and subdivision ordinances.*³⁶

To achieve this first goal, the city's action items include that Gonzales should analyze the obstacles to developing multifamily and affordable housing in the city's development code.³⁷ In order to do this, Gonzales should look at building height limits and parking requirements, among other things, and reduce or remove obstacles that exist for this kind of development. Lastly, Gonzales should look into different partnerships that would promote mixed-income housing.

2. *Work with for-profit and non-profit developers to encourage new mixed-income developments across the city.*³⁸

To achieve the second goal, the city's action item is that Gonzales should promote development of diverse housing options, which include multifamily units and townhomes.³⁹ Compared to single family homes, the city explains that these types of units have lower energy use per unit.

ENVIRONMENT

Gonzales wants to retain and build on its environmental amenities.⁴⁰ Gonzales has many parks and lots of natural and open space land. The plan emphasizes that the city wants to maintain its “environmentally sensitive areas” and guarantee its residents access to natural amenities.

To achieve this vision and promote environmental conservation and community spaces, two relevant guiding principles are to “[e]nsure quality new development that is balanced to provide a healthy community” and to minimize “potential flood risks.”⁴¹ Building on these principles, in the Land Use and Community Character section, the city provides five goals:

1. *Sensitive areas such as wetlands are protected and best practices are used when developing in floodplain areas.*⁴²

³⁵ *Id.* at 59.

³⁶ *Id.* at 123.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 132.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 5.

⁴² *Id.* at 59.

To achieve the first goal, the city's action items include Gonzales prioritizing using "undeveloped floodplain areas . . . for storm water conveyance and retention," and for development within these areas, only using management practices that minimize development impacts.⁴³ The plan also states that Gonzales should improve its floodplain regulations so that they implement the coastal best practices. Lastly, on developed land, the city suggests that using cluster development techniques or higher densities can preserve open floodplain areas.

2. *Capture stormwater through landscape design, green infrastructure practices, and other environmentally-friendly techniques.*⁴⁴

To achieve the second goal, the city's action items are that Gonzales should work "with businesses and property owners to implement innovative stormwater solutions as demonstration projects" (e.g., a project that creates additional capacity for the city's sewer system) as well as create "stormwater management standards that address stormwater quality treatment and stormwater conveyance/detention."⁴⁵ For the stormwater management standards, the city says that the standards should target "retaining natural site drainage and reducing impervious pavement coverage;" "[i]mplement[ing] a green infrastructure improvements program to reduce runoff in areas with drainage issues;" creating "landscaping standards to appropriately manage runoff created by impervious surfaces;" encouraging "low impact development strategies and designs" for "manag[ing] stormwater runoff," which include but are not limited to using "vegetated swales, biofilters, eco-roofs, green streets, pervious pavement;" and "[d]evelop[ing] alternative street designs and standards that allow for greater filtration and more appropriate stormwater conveyance."⁴⁶

3. *Protect open space and natural and sensitive areas.*⁴⁷

To achieve the third goal, the city's action items are that Gonzales should preserve open spaces and sensitive areas as natural recreation areas.⁴⁸ The city outlines that Gonzales should create a plan for this and also partner with the private sector to create passive parks, trails, and natural areas.

4. *Provide easily accessible parks and open space in neighborhoods.*⁴⁹

To achieve the fourth goal, the city's action items are that Gonzales should expand the amount of trails in the city, access to trails, and maintain already existing trails.⁵⁰

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 59–60.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 60.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

5. *Develop public-private partnerships to maintain and expand parks and recreational facilities throughout Gonzales.*⁵¹

To achieve the fifth goal, the city's action items are that Gonzales should develop an adopt-a-park program.⁵² This program would involve local organizations and school groups who would help maintain the city's parks and encourage civic pride. The city also suggests that they could host neighborhood work days, which support community caretaking of the parks.

Overall, the plan's environmental considerations include an emphasis on green spaces and community amenities and benefits, reducing future flood risk, and building overall community resilience, which will be especially important as climate change increases different types of flooding events in the future.

Silverleaf Neighborhood Buyout Program

The Silverleaf neighborhood in Gonzales is an example of a neighborhood that was affected by rising waters and increased flooding events in Louisiana. Gonzales worked with the neighborhood to implement the city's first buyout to address these threats, relocate residents to a safer area, and restore natural wetlands for their community, environmental, and risk-reduction benefits. This presents how Gonzales used one flood mitigation tool to implement some of the goals in its comprehensive plan.

The Silverleaf neighborhood was built in 1988. Soon after, homeowners faced repetitive and frequent flooding events that damaged their homes. The low-lying neighborhood experienced "runoff pouring into streets and homes" during flooding.⁵³ Although Gonzales is located about 60 miles from the coast, rising waters still impacted the Silverleaf neighborhood. After a major storm hit the area in 2016 — also referred to throughout much of Louisiana as the "Great Floods of 2016" — residents attended a city public meeting and expressed concern that their neighborhood was constantly flooding even after more moderate storms.⁵⁴

Initially, the city conducted studies to analyze whether there were tools or strategies that were both cost-effective and could reduce flooding; however, solutions like levees and pump installations were too expensive and would have had negative effects on nearby

⁵¹ *Id.* at 61.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ Jennifer Kay, *High Water Routs Inland Towns in Sign of Climate Change to Come*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Nov. 12, 2019, 6:01 AM), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/environment-and-energy/high-water-routs-inland-towns-in-sign-of-climate-change-to-come>.

⁵⁴ Ellyn Couvillion, *Flooding nightmare over for residents of Silverleaf Street in Gonzales after federal buyout*, THE ADVOCATE (Oct. 10, 2020, 10:00 PM), https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/communities/ascension/article_f7c31692-07fc-11eb-b8bf-e33ff1e41f38.html.

communities.⁵⁵ Many of the Silverleaf residents also faced “debt from previous flood repairs, at a cost of roughly \$5 million.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, Gonzales officials and community residents identified buyouts as the preferred flood mitigation option. In general, a buyout is when a government or other entity purchases a property from a willing seller, demolishes existing structures on the property, and prohibits future development and allows the property to naturally revert to open space in perpetuity.⁵⁷

The city worked directly with the Louisiana Office of Community Development (OCD) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to implement the buyouts in the Silverleaf neighborhood. Together, OCD and NRCS provided almost \$20 million for this program. OCD contributed U.S. Housing and Urban Development’s Community Development Block Grant Mitigation funds.⁵⁸ The NRCS money was from a program dedicated to acquiring easements to protect wetlands on inland properties for rural conservation purposes. Such an easement restricts the land from being used for anything other than wetlands.

In addition, the state provided funding from the Restore Louisiana disaster recovery program to better enable residents to move to a safe, comparable new home.⁵⁹ Buyout participants usually receive the appraised pre-storm or -flood fair market value for their home. In Gonzales, Silverleaf property values increased between the time of the 2016 floods and when the homeowners accepted a buyout from the city in 2019. The state agreed to provide homeowners with a relocation payment above the fair market value of their homes that totaled the difference between the 2016 and 2019 appraised value of their homes. This supplemental money helped ease some of the financial burdens associated with the buyout process.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Kay, *High Water Routs Inland Towns in Sign of Climate Change to Come*, BLOOMBERG LAW (Nov. 12, 2019, 6:01 AM), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/environment-and-energy/high-water-routs-inland-towns-in-sign-of-climate-change-to-come>.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ See Katie Spidaliere & Annie Bennett, Georgetown Climate Ctr., *Voluntary Buyouts > Acquisition Tools*, MANAGED RETREAT TOOLKIT, <https://www.georgetownclimate.org/adaptation/toolkits/managed-retreat-toolkit/voluntary-buyouts.html> (last visited Nov. 17, 2021).

⁵⁸ See generally *Community Development Block Grant Mitigation Program*, HUD EXCHANGE, <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/cdbg-mit/> (last visited Nov. 19, 2021) (“The Community Development Block Grant Mitigation (CDBG-MIT) Program is a unique and significant opportunity for eligible grantees to use this assistance in areas impacted by recent disasters to carry out strategic and high-impact activities to mitigate disaster risks and reduce future losses. Congress appropriated \$12 billion in CDBG funds in February 2018 specifically for mitigation activities for qualifying disasters in 2015, 2016, and 2017, and HUD was able to allocate an additional \$3.9 billion, bringing the amount available for mitigation to nearly \$16 billion.”); see also RESTORE LA., <https://www.restore.la.gov> (last visited Nov. 19, 2021).

⁵⁹ See generally RESTORE LA., <https://www.restore.la.gov> (last visited Nov. 19, 2021).

After more than three years, in 2020, the Silverleaf buyout program was completed and 41 property owners moved out of the neighborhood.⁶⁰ Most owners relocated to places in Gonzales and Ascension Parish. Since Silverleaf residents relocated in 2020, the former neighborhood has flooded at least five times. This underscores the significant need that existed to get people out of harm's way.

Post buyout, the demolition of structures and environmental restoration work is 100 percent completed as well. Over 2,000 native Louisiana trees have been planted on the now city-owned land and project closeout is finished.

Administratively, the process to relocate an entire neighborhood consisting of 41 homeowners would be challenging for any local government, let alone a city undertaking its first buyout program. This can be compounded by limited capacity at the municipal level, where staff often wear multiple hats. Some of the keys to success in Gonzales revolved around having a local champion and partners. Here, one city staff member, who largely led the entire buyout process on behalf of the city, was committed to providing flood-prone residents with a way out of their present circumstances. In addition, like with the local comprehensive plan, Gonzales once again sought support from the Center of Planning Excellence to handle the homeowner intake forms.

Another takeaway that enabled 100 percent of residents to participate in the buyout was the shared experiences between residents and the city. Many, if not all residents, were able to understand the devastation that flooding and disaster events can wreak on people individually and as a community. The staff lead in Gonzales, who did not live in the Silverleaf neighborhood, was able to establish and maintain trust with the residents due to shared experiences reflecting on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. When engaging people over what can be a challenging and often traumatic process, it is critical that those considering buyouts trust the government officials supporting them.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The city developed the plan's guiding principles through citizen engagement that then shaped the action items identified.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ellyn Couvillion, *Flooding nightmare over for residents of Silverleaf Street in Gonzales after federal buyout*, THE ADVOCATE (Oct. 10, 2020, 10:00 PM), https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/communities/ascension/article_f7c31692-07fc-11eb-b8bf-e33ff1e41f38.html.

⁶¹ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., *Gonzales Comprehensive Plan 4* (2015), available at https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf.

The city started by assembling a stakeholder committee composed of 19 Gonzales residents.⁶² Each resident on the committee had a different background and expertise. The committee met monthly starting in 2014 to learn about the issues, like affordable housing and flood risks in Gonzales, and used that information to review drafts of the plan and provide opinions and feedback. The committee also participated and publicized public meetings. The committee was one way to connect stakeholder groups with the CPEX consultant team.

In addition to the committee, the plan's CPEX consultant team met with a diverse group of stakeholders, including Gonzales City staff, elected officials, school board members, and real estate and development professionals.⁶³ The purpose of these meetings was to talk with people who would be directly impacted by the plan. The meetings were used to help create the plan's guiding principles.

Beyond individual interviews, the consultant team also publicized and hosted three separate public meetings.⁶⁴ The three meetings included a visioning workshop, a downtown workshop, and an open house. The consultant team used outreach methods that they believed would get the highest amount of public participation for each of these meetings.

At the visioning workshop, attendees were asked to reflect on things they wanted for Gonzales, rather than what they assume will happen to the city in the future.⁶⁵ Attendees were divided into groups of ten with a facilitator. Each group was given maps of the Gonzales, markers, and colored paper that represented various types of development. With these materials, each group wrote down "their goals for the city's land use, development, housing and transportation." They also "outlined areas for preservation and revitalization, drew in new transportation infrastructure, and used chips to show where future development was desired in the following categories: civic, employment, open space and parks, mixed use, commercial, and residential." All groups showed their vision to the entire workshop and the maps were digitized post-workshop. The most common themes from each map were determined and the digitized formats of the maps were merged into one large Vision Map.

At the downtown workshop, attendees were asked to focus on the issue of revitalizing Gonzales's downtown area.⁶⁶ Participants were divided into groups of eight with a facilitator and were provided with large maps of the downtown area. Similar to the visioning workshop, all maps were digitized post-workshop, and the most common themes were determined. The digitized formats of the maps helped create the basis for the city's findings and recommendations for downtown revitalization, which are listed in the plan.

⁶² *Id.* at 15.

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 16.

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 18.

For the open house, to garner participation, a draft of the plan was sent out through email, put on the Gonzales city website, and provided at both Gonzales City Hall and the Gonzales section of the Ascension Parish Library.⁶⁷

NEXT STEPS

On August 3 and 24, 2015, the City Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council adopted the plan, respectively.⁶⁸ The plan is intended to be used as a guiding document for future development and is not regulatory in nature.⁶⁹

Post-adoption, through the plan, the city created accountability measures for itself and the community to make the plan a living document that will guide future city actions. For example, one accountability measure is that the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council will consider the plan before approving laws, ordinances, and regulations.⁷⁰ Furthermore, for future land use and development decisions, the city intends to present and cite to goals and actions in the plan that either do or do not support its decisions. Lastly, the city hopes that business owners, development and real estate professionals, and current and future Gonzales residents also refer to the plan. The aim is for the plan to provide these individuals with greater “predictability” for the city’s development decisions, in addition to encouraging higher quality development projects.⁷¹

In 2016, Gonzales updated Chapter 22 of the city’s municipal code as a direct result of the comprehensive plan’s implementation.⁷² The chapter now states that the “zoning code is adopted for the purpose of guiding development in accordance with the City of Gonzales’s comprehensive plan and existing and future needs of the City of Gonzales in order to protect, promote and improve the public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, appearance, prosperity and general welfare.”⁷³

CONSIDERATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

For local policymakers, this is an example of designing a local comprehensive plan to address growth, while balancing community needs and environmental conservation in a rural area experiencing new demands for development. The Gonzales plan addresses community needs

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 15.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 4.

⁶⁹ Ctr. for Planning Excellence et al., Gonzales Comprehensive Plan (2015), available at https://gonzalesla.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gonzales_Comprehensive_Plan_08.24.15_web.pdf.

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 4.

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² CITY OF GONZALES, LA. CODE OF ORDINANCES § 33:4721(22-1)(a)(5), available at https://library.municode.com/la/gonzales/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COOR_CH22ZO_APXBPLUNDEPU_C.

⁷³ *Id.*

comprehensively and grounded them in community feedback and needs through the community engagement process and guiding principles.

The plan incorporates affordable housing considerations, in particular diversifying the options and affordability of the housing stock in Gonzales to meet local character and needs. The Gonzales plan also incorporates environmental considerations, with an emphasis on green spaces, community amenities and benefits, and reducing future flood risk while building overall community resilience. This is especially important as flooding and disaster events change in frequency and intensity. The Silverleaf buyout program is one example of how Gonzales is actively helping residents to adapt to increased levels of flooding.

Lastly, the Gonzales plan was created with the intention of being a living document and having accountability measures in place for the city to implement the plan. The plan is an example of how a city successfully aligned both a plan and zoning code updates to carry forward the community's vision for Gonzales through new development and redevelopment.