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## News



Photo by Quynh Tran | Unsplash | Water taxi and café at Vermilion River Esplanade

### “Together we can become regional and national role models in transportation alternatives and sustainability.” – Mayor Alm-LaBar

12 October 2020, Lafayette, Louisiana, US

Commemorating their latest achievement in alternative transportation measures at the Vermilion River Esplanade ribbon cutting ceremony, Lafayette and Acadiana officials came together as board members of the Lafayette Initiative for Flexible Transportation (L.I.F.T.). “It’s been a long, bumpy road, so to speak, but I think we can be proud of the exciting new transportation options now available in our beautiful community,” Dr. Anne-Julia Price, Executive Director of L.I.F.T., told attendants in her opening remarks.

The Vermilion River Esplanade, located next to the Rotary Point Boat Ramp in Lafayette, Louisiana, is one of the initiatives highlighted in the alternative transportation package developed in January 2020 by L.I.F.T. in collaboration with the Lafayette Consolidated Government (LCG), University of Louisiana at Lafayette Office of Sustainability, Lafayette Convention and Visitors Bureau (LCVC), Acadiana Planning Commission (MPO) and Lafayette Economic Development Authority (LEDA).

L.I.F.T.’s objective is to expand flexible alternatives to driving in the Acadiana area. These efforts were designed to curb climate change; decrease road infrastructure and economic concerns; promote healthier lifestyle options; and boost tourism, community interaction and overall livability in conjunction with the universal initiative launched in 2019 by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.



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The board's recently completed projects include Gotcha's UL campus and regional electric vehicle-share program; student and employee transit pass incentives; a bike lane and pedestrian crosswalk art program; increased bus routes and times; and an extensive promotional campaign to educate the community on available driving alternatives and safety measures.

The ceremony of the esplanade's official inauguration was combined with the boudin cutting observance held yearly at the opening of Festivals Acadiens et Creole, a free community-based festival taking place the second weekend of October in Girard Park.

The festival, which Chef and Director Patrick Mould aims to make "the greenest festival in the state," currently contributes to area environmental improvements by providing compostable or biodegradable containers in its food concessions and recycle bins, including facilities for glass as part of the GlassLand Project for coastal wetland restoration. Attendees of the festival are also encouraged to "save the planet ... ride your bike," and are provided access to a bike corral featuring safe bike racks.

"This is the best time of year in Louisiana, when we actually see hints of fall," said Mayor of Lafayette Carlee Alm-LaBar. "And what a perfect day to sit outside and enjoy coffee or wine at the promenade café before taking the water taxi along the Vermilion River and Coulee Mine to the festival at the park."

"We've tried before to implement transportation alternatives as individual entities, but L.I.F.T. brought us together, reminding us of the strength in community," Director of MPO Paul Casey told reporters. "There were many factors at stake, including our area's high obesity rate and increasing insurance costs and pollution issues. We all knew that we needed to make a change; we were just missing the final link. L.I.F.T. was it."

#### *Issues*

In October 2019, L.I.F.T. presented a report on vital area concerns, along with solutions and benefits. In a 2014 MarketWatch report, Lafayette was named Happiest City in America, despite serious health and environmental concerns.

Louisiana ranked first for worst drivers and rate of obesity in the US and last in economic performance, opportunity and infrastructure. And the costs of owning a car, traffic congestion, insurance, stress and healthcare were increasing. There was also a growing demand for safe and reliable public transportation options, which the city and region were lacking.

#### *Benefits*

Benefits of transportation alternatives were also noted by Dr. Price. "According to the American Public Transport Association, reliable access to public transit can save over \$10,000 per year on transportation costs." "Not only that," she noted, "but residential property values better; tourists appreciate and contribute more money to the area when there are reliable transportation options; and electric vehicles help save energy and taxpayer resources. Alternatives also pave the way for a healthier lifestyle, increased community interaction and a better overall infrastructure."

"With crucial climate change concerns, ever-increasing bike-share systems across the US and more cities around the world working together to apply practical alternatives, there was no argument to L.I.F.T.'s plan," held Gretchen Vanicor, Director of Sustainability at UL at Lafayette.

## Solutions

Once the L.I.F.T. project was approved, a board of city, parish and regional entities was formed. To help curb fiscal concerns, planning initiatives, federal and UN grants and financial participation by the tourism and hotel industries were realized to help assist in facilitating short-term goals.

The UL Office of Sustainability expanded their bike system, and a path between Lafayette and Breaux Bridge was created. And because a plan had previously been proposed to open the Vermilion River to a promenade and water taxi service, a unanimous decision was made to authorize immediate construction.

Acadiana residents are now able to walk along the riverfront promenade, dine in or out at the café and ride the water taxi to mapped destinations, with each stop providing accessible electric bikes and bus transit for commuters to continue their journey on land. The board is also planning a kayak-share program in the near future.

"Safe, reliable and affordable alternatives to driving are winning in our area," Dr. Price continued. "It has been an honor to work with city, regional and national decision makers as well as the United Nations to develop sustainable options to improve our beautiful Louisiana way of life and make Lafayette and Acadiana leaders in livability and sustainability."

Source: UN News Centre



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