

## Baton Rouge Downtown Development District

### INNOVATION

The Central Green's purpose to provide accessible event and quality public greenspace to Baton Rouge citizens also utilized several innovative, sustainable and environmentally sensitive building practices. Several features of the Central Green are considered truly innovative, but the reimagining of a dense, complex urban landscape into a living landscape was perhaps the most original and challenging aspect. Several tons of concrete were removed and infrastructure was evaluated and reconfigured to include more pervious surfaces, efficient water features, native trees and plantings, and a green roof.

A green roof was installed within the Central Green, spanning over a 400 space parking garage and increasing event capacity as it allowed viewing of the main stage from both sides. Its implementation was particularly challenging as it not only needed to withstand its own weight, but also the increased loads with thousands of event attendees. To minimize the weight of the green roof the design team utilized a unique, light-weight foam material and soil blend to minimize the structural load.

One of the site's previous features was a large cascading pool that inefficiently wasted large amounts of water, costing the city over \$300,000 a year to maintain. With the implementation of the Central Green, the large fountain was demolished and two interactive fountain features replaced it, each more efficient and with their own innovative features. One is able to change color with different community events and the other features over 700 fountains that interact with a nearby sensor, changing heights and patterns with the wind.

### OUTCOME

The Central Green initiative catalyzed the revitalization of downtown's core by providing public greenspace to host a variety of events. Over 250 annual events are hosted in the Central Green, attracting over 140,000 visitors to downtown. The Central Green has become a regional destination, increasing hotel occupancy rates, as well as restaurant and retail sales. With an increased capacity for large crowds and numerous stages, events are able to include more acts with less down time, less street closures have been required, and regional events continue to expand. Annual event attendance continues to rise, tripling in capacity over the past decade and event applications rose from approximately 100 in 2012 to 250 in 2019.

The continual increase in the number of events and visitors has created a surge in economic development downtown resulting in over \$900 million invested by the private sector. To accommodate the growing number of downtown residents and visitors, 500 nearby residential units have been developed, previously vacant adjacent properties are now occupied, and existing businesses have extended their operating hours.

The Central Green has the potential to grow both in community impact and event numbers. As part of the Central Green initiative, Plan Baton Rouge II also endorsed a series of green transportation corridors radiating from the Central Green to provide safe, accessible, and comfortable pedestrian and bicycle connections to the space. The DDD developed this recommendation into a comprehensive transportation initiative known as the Downtown Greenway with portions already complete or underway.

### EXECUTION

The complexity and scale of the Central Green recommendation required its implementation to be phased with multiple funding sources. City-Parish budget constraints to implementing such a large project required the leveraging of several funding resources and creating a dedicated state sales tax from parish hotels for riverfront development. Grants were also procured from federal, state and local resources and the DDD spearheaded the dedication of these public funds, writing and submitting grants on the City-Parish's behalf and jointly overseeing design development and construction administration with city engineers. As each phase of the Central Green was completed, annual events increased as well as the community's support of the project. With its success, political support for the Central Green flourished and the City-Parish committed additional funds to advance implementation efforts.

Nationally recognized landscape architects were engaged to create a congruent, flexible, and sustainable design with an emphasis on detail. Respected and experienced construction teams with meticulous project oversight ensured the Central Green's overall quality of place. Public art professionals attentively placed several sculptures. Between 2012 and 2019, the phases of the Central Green were complete, linking our cultural and civic attractions into over 11 acres of cohesive, safe, and enjoyable public space.

## **REPRESENTATION**

The complexity of the Central Green required an extensive effort that was spearheaded by the DDD and in a joint effort comprised of the Mayor's Office and Department of Public Works. Throughout the planning process, a comprehensive community outreach effort was conducted, incorporating thousands of residents, and business, civic and community leaders, and planners. The population of East Baton Rouge (EBR) City-Parish is very diverse and the overall initiative of creating event and public space that welcomed all citizens, resulted in the initial vision of the dynamic and innovative Central Green. The public continues to be engaged about events and efforts.

Strengthening and unifying our diverse social fabric was a prominent theme with the implementation of the Central Green community and accessibility was a primary consideration to achieve that goal. Accessibility concerning ADA compliance as well as available safe transportation options to the Central Green were incorporated, including projects and services that increase community access. The primary downtown transit hub was located at the edge of the greenspace and a connecting trolley route circulating downtown was also incorporated. In addition, the connecting Downtown Greenway, a bicycle and pedestrian transportation initiative, connects surrounding inner city neighborhoods safely to the Central Green.

## **REPLICATION**

The implementation strategy of the Central Green can be replicated in cities across the region to revitalize urban hardscapes into lush greenspaces for the public to enjoy. The creation of a City-Parish adopted community-driven master plan has been instrumental in accessing grant funds, gaining community and political support, and furthering the cause of creating quality downtown spaces accessible to all. Strategically phasing a large-scale project recommended in a master plan into manageable components or spaces is also a replicable practice that moves implementation efforts forward at a steady pace and provides the community an immediate and enjoyable space. The result of immediate efforts towards implementing the community's vision further strengthens overall support for the continued development of the overall project. As the DDD spearheaded the planning, design, construction, maintenance and event programming of the Central Green, a critical component to replicating this strategy is to have a downtown focused leader overseeing each developed component to ensure a seamless integration with the overall concept and quality of space. Another strategy that can be seized from the Central Green is the creation of a pedestrian focused circulation network connecting people to downtown's public space, events, and cultural attractions.

## **COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY**

The technical complexity of the Central Green required an immense amount of communication between the design teams, Baton Rouge officials and engineers, and surrounding attractions and venues. The site of the Central Green presented several design challenges as a large portion is situated above two floors of parking and there are significant elevation changes, giving form to the previously fragmented space. The structural support of the main stage and green roof required a diverse team of designers and engineers to collaborate and create designs that would both function and inspire. The sculptural form of the main stage structure, located in the center of the Central Green, provides a view uncompromised by the simple, elegant landscape elements surrounding it. Carefully calculated site elevations and structural loads provided a solution that created an accessible and flexible space that tied seamlessly into the surrounding grade and conditions.

During the construction of the Central Green, maintaining public accessibility to the nearby attractions, services, and amenities was also quite challenging. Event bookings continued to rise despite nearly constant construction activity. The DDD, working close with construction teams and event coordinators, developed public notifications and wayfinding to mitigate conflict with construction and enhance public perception.