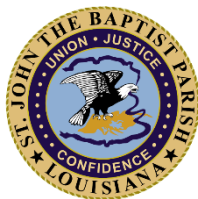




**MANCHAC**  
GREENWAY  
GREENWAY  
MANCHAC

**MANCHAC GREENWAY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN  
WHITE PAPER**

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## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

### Project Overview

The Maurepas Landbridge makes up 99,517 acres of St. John the Baptist Parish. Due to its natural function as a flood storage area, high susceptibility to storm surge, and its exclusion from the protection area of the Westshore Lake Pontchartrain Levee system, it is a large piece of land that is not suitable for conventional land development. However, it is precisely because of these reasons that the area is invaluable to St. John the Baptist Parish and has the potential to become a unique economic and environmental asset.

In 2016, the Manchac Greenway was formally established on the landbridge. Greenways are land use tools that mix environmental protection with economic activity. Friends of the Manchac Greenway, the nonprofit group responsible for the establishment of the Manchac Greenway, have done outstanding work in building partnerships with state and local entities to formalize their vision of a bike corridor along the landbridge. However, without local government assistance, the greenway will not be able to reach its full potential as a local asset and regional attraction. St. John the Baptist Parish has the resources, capacity, knowledge, and, more importantly, the incentive to further develop the greenway in a manner that is ecologically responsible as well as economically viable.

In order for potential components of the greenway to receive state funding, a master plan must be developed that includes a purpose and project guidelines. This paper advocates for St. John the Baptist Parish to create such a plan using its annual allotment of RESTORE funding, money distributed to the parish from the penalties of the 2010 BP oil spill. The RESTORE Act states that the funding may only be used on ecosystem restoration, economic development, and tourism promotion; three elements that are inherent in greenway design. A Manchac Greenway Master Plan would make efficient and appropriate use of RESTORE dollars and set goals for future RESTORE dollar spending that will transform an underutilized part of the parish into a model of sustainable land use for the region.



Figure 1: Manchac Landbridge

### Introduction

Communities have developed greenways in many shapes and sizes. At its core, a greenway is a band of linear green space that connects people and natural resources and mixes land uses in an ecologically responsible way. Further, a greenway can be developed in many different types of



communities ranging from highly urban areas to largely rural ones. However, most greenways, such as the St. Tammany Trace, connect suburban communities. In many cases, greenways are established around abandoned or decaying infrastructure such as seldom-used roads or rail lines. In fact, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a non-profit organization with more than one million grass-roots supporters, has converted 23,000 miles of dilapidated infrastructure into greenways bringing transformative benefits to communities across the nation. In essence, a greenway uses outdated infrastructure as an opportunity to promote active recreation, cost effective open space protection, and economic opportunity.

In the late 1980s, the alignment of U.S. Highway 51 in LaPlace, LA was rerouted to join U.S. Interstate 55 (I-55). The former stretch of road that comprised the previous alignment was dubbed Old U.S. 51 (Old 51). After the realignment, traffic decreased on Old 51, and it came to be used mostly as a scenic route for the locals of LaPlace. In 2015, the Friends of the Manchac Greenway (FMG), a local nonprofit group, saw an opportunity to use Old 51 as a bicycle path to attract locals and tourists, boost the economy, and contribute to the “Ring around the Lake”, a planned regional bicycle trail around Lake Pontchartrain. In 2016, the group partnered with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development to formally establish the stretch of Old 51 from LaPlace to Ponchatoula as the Manchac Greenway by installing signs that label the road as a shared automobile and bike route. The FMG now aim to further improve the bike route by installing safety features such as road striping and bollards to establish a fully protected bike lane.

The Manchac Land Bridge constitutes the ideal land formation of a greenway: it is linear, suburban/rural, surrounded by natural resources, and contains an under-utilized piece of transportation infrastructure. A greenway has the potential to utilize the ecological, recreational, historical, and economic assets of the area in a manner that aligns with both Parish and State goals of resilience and sustainability. Although the stretch of Old 51 from LaPlace to Ponchatoula is formally dubbed a greenway, it currently is not living up to its full potential. The Manchac Greenway is in the beginning stages of what could become an asset for St. John the Baptist Parish and a jewel for the entire southeast Louisiana region. The remainder of this paper outlines the conditions and opportunities to develop the St. John Parish portion of the Manchac Greenway.



*Figure 2: Greenway next to wetlands*

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

### Infrastructure

Old US 51 runs at grade level, parallel to the elevated U.S. I-55, along the narrow strip of land between Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas. This strip of land, the Manchac Landbridge, is host to the second largest swath of forested wetlands in Louisiana that are permanently and semi-permanently flooded during any given time of the year. Due to its low elevation and wet surroundings, Old 51, often referred to as the “low road,” is inundated and impassible during storms and heavy rains. The flood waters can act as a barrier to evacuation for residents living in Frenier, a community located on the western shore of Lake Pontchartrain about five miles north of LaPlace.

### Flood Risk

100 % of the Maurepas Landbridge lies within a special flood hazard area, or floodplain. Although flood waters on the landbridge can be inconvenient and dangerous, flooding is a natural function of the wetlands in the area. The forested wetlands, or swamp, act as a natural flood storage space collecting excess water that would otherwise flow into in urban areas. Indeed, the area is comprised of two different flood zones: AE flood zones, or the 100-year floodplain, and VE flood zones, also known as coastal high hazard areas. Both shores of the landbridge along Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas are a part of the coastal high hazard area, which means that these areas are highly vulnerable to damages from storm surge. Nonetheless, the landbridge itself serves as a crucial buffer to storm surge, protecting communities in St. John the Baptist and the region. Further, the landbridge is a critical component of the “Multiple Lines of Defense” strategy adopted by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) that combines natural elements with engineered protection to defend coastal communities against storm surge risk.

The coastal high hazard area (VE zone) extends inland from the shore of Lake Pontchartrain by an average of 800 feet before it gives way to the 100-year flood plain (AE Zone) that comprises the middle area of the landbridge. These areas in the 100-year floodplain have a 1% chance of being inundated with 8 to 12 feet of water each year, according to the flood maps created for the parish by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 2010. However, a recent report by state climatologist and LSU professor Barry Keim warned that storms and daily showers are increasingly wet and more intense, and lead to sudden flash floods like the 2016 floods in Baton Rouge and Denham springs. Research like Keim’s report suggests that the current flood zone maps may soon be outdated and the flood risk of the landbridge heightened. In fact, the scientific modeling in the CPRA’s Coastal Master Plan shows that over the next 50 years flood depths will rise to over 15 feet on the landbridge.

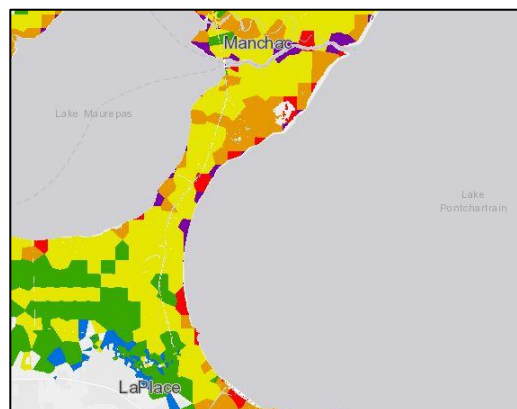


Figure 3: Flood risk data, CPRA

### Environmental Integrity

Large swaths of Maurepas Swamp, located on the landbridge, is relict and degraded. The main stressors responsible are shoreline erosion, subsidence, saltwater intrusion, and altered hydrology. The swamp has suffered from human stressors as well. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the swamp on the landbridge was heavily logged; cypress was valued for its unique resistance to rot and was used to build many structures in southeast Louisiana that still stand today. However, the logging industry left an indelible scar on the swamp in the countless canals that were carved into the swamp for pull-boats to access the forested wetland and cut down the trees. The canals remained even after the industry crumbled and complicate the natural hydrology of the area. The Mississippi River levees also altered the swamp's hydrology by cutting off its historic source of flowing freshwater. The canals and levees have impounded the swamp, trapping stagnant water in areas that only seasonally flood. This deprives seeds the ground they need to germinate, and degrades the swamp further. Due to subsidence, sinking of the land, the elevation of the swamp is lower than the surface elevation of Lake Pontchartrain. As the swamp sinks, wave energy from the lake beats at the shore and gradually erodes it away. The result is a mostly denuded swamp transitioned into marsh, unable to provide the habitat for many native species of flora and fauna.

Wildlife in the area has declined in recent years. The landbridge is a stop for birds that use the Mississippi River as a fly way for migration. In the past, the swamp attracted thousands of waterfowl migrating south for the winter and was very popular with hunters. Presently, the numbers of birds have been in sharp decline. Recent waterfowl harvesting data from the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Department show only a small number of ducks claimed by hunters. This is concerning for all animal species who call the swamp home, especially the endangered bald eagle and gulf sturgeon.

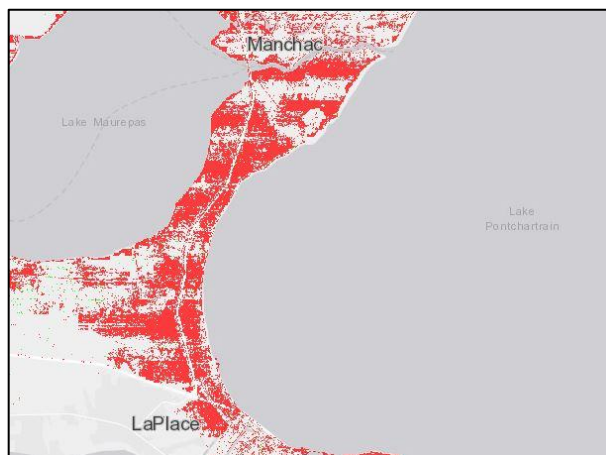


Figure 4: Land loss data, CPRA

### Economic Activity

Current economic activity along the Manchac Greenway mostly revolves around eco-tourism and service. Three different touring companies utilize the Maurepas Swamp as an attraction for kayak rentals and guided tours of the numerous canals and paddle lanes carved through the forest. All three touring companies offer unique experiences:



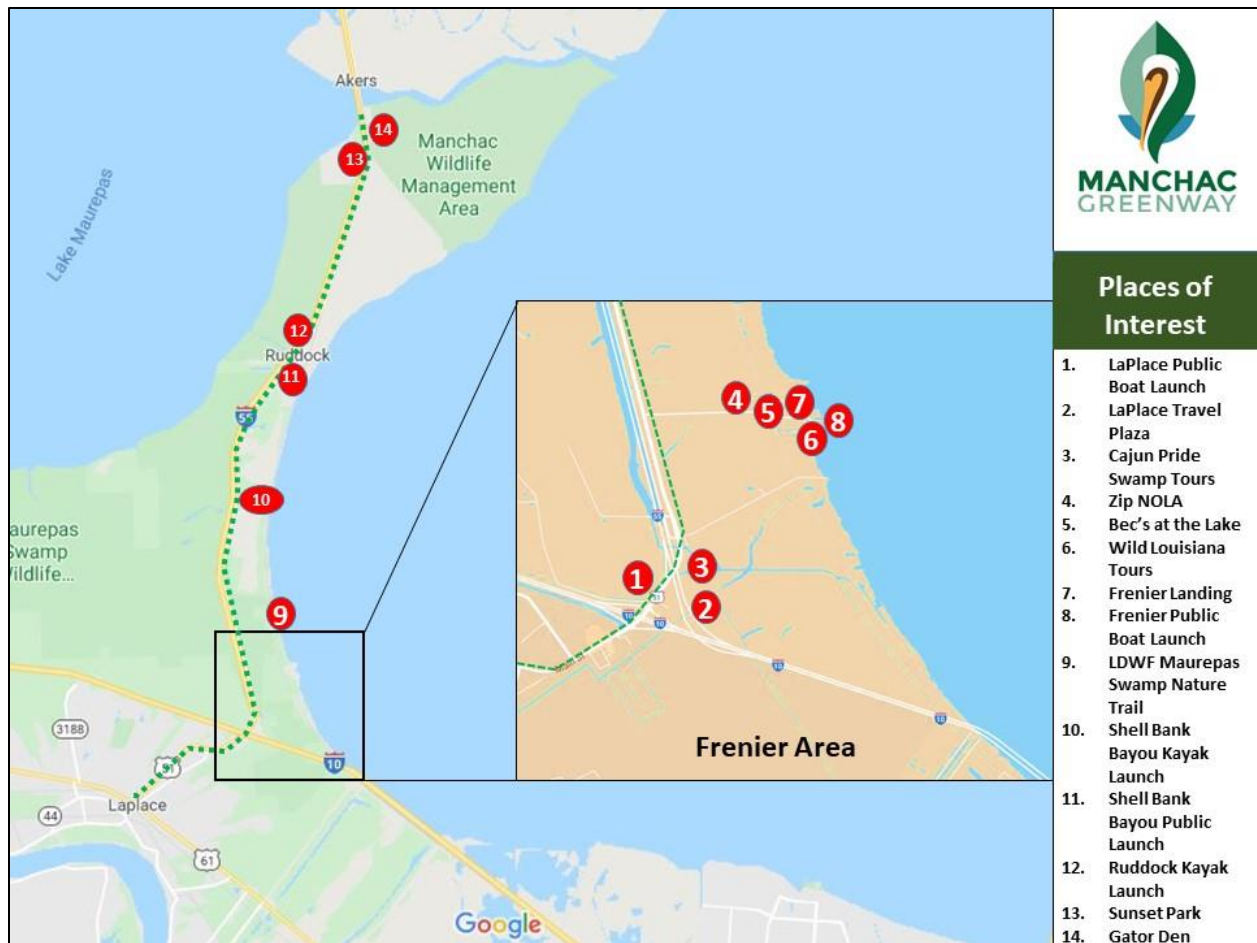
- *New Orleans Kayak Swamp Tours* bases their business model on sustainability and strictly focuses on non-motorized kayak tours. In 2018, the company was awarded a Certificate of Excellence from *TripAdvisor*, an online travel company with over 400 million users.
- *Cajun Pride Swamp Tours* provides motorized boat tours of the swamp. The company's boat captains are all grew up in the area, and they share their local knowledge of the swamp with visitors.
- *Wild Louisiana Tours*. This company has both kayak and small boat touring options. It also provides other unique services like a kayak photography workshop and an in shore kayak fishing charter.

All three of these companies are part of the eco-tourism industry. Soon, another eco-tourism based company will begin operations on the Manchac Greenway. *Zip NOLA* will install approximately 2,000 linear feet of adventure zip lines through the trees of Maurepas Swamp, a first-of-its-kind for the region. Besides providing a zip line service, *Zip NOLA* plans to educate visitors on the Maurepas Swamp ecosystem, as well as the local history and folklore of the town of Frenier. The company hopes to attract younger travelers looking for thrilling experiences.

Several dining and bar service venues also exist on the greenway. In the Frenier community, *Bec's at the Lake* and *Frenier Landing* both provide a full seafood menu and boast great views of Lake Pontchartrain. *Bec's* origins lie in the catering business and offers catering as well as a full-service restaurant. Similarly, *Frenier Landing* offers more than just food but also live entertainment with local musicians every weekend. At the other end of the greenway located just at the Parish line is the *Gator's Den*, a bar that caters to customers living in St. John the Baptist and Tangipahoa Parishes. *Gator's Den* sits on the edge of the parish at Pass Manchac, the waterway that connects Lake Maurepas and Lake Pontchartrain and the end of the Manchac Greenway in St. John the Baptist Parish.

A cluster of businesses exists on Old 51 at the junction of I-55 and I-10 that includes a *Shell* gas station, *Poker Palace Casino*, a *Huddle House* restaurant, and the *Suburban Extended Stay* hotel. The businesses are mostly geared towards travelers passing through the Parish to other destinations.

Future land development on the greenway is an arduous task; developments must comply with a multitude of local, state, and federal regulations to obtain a permit to build. Due to the landbridge's wetland delineation, developers must obtain a Coastal Use Permit from the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, as well as a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that must be reviewed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, and National Marine Fisheries Service. The permit application review process for all agencies is lengthy, and the permit application fees are considerable. Additionally, developments must comply with local and FEMA floodplain regulations; all structures to be built on the landbridge would have to be elevated to a minimum of 8 feet in the air in some places and a minimum of 12 feet in others. These same regulations dictate that the developments must meet special coastal construction standards that are to be reviewed and stamped by a licensed engineer. The highly regulated nature of the landbridge hints at the economic benefit of preserving the natural systems and cycles that occur on the land. Without such regulation, the economic losses would far outweigh the benefits.



### Recreational Activity

The Manchac Greenway bike path was created for the purposes of recreational cycling. It is formally recognized by DOTD as a bike path, although it offers no protection from motorists. The path runs from LaPlace to Ponchatoula connecting residents of both communities to the recreational assets that exist on the Manchac Landbridge. Several boat launches are located on the greenway that allow residents to launch kayaks and boats into the swampy waters that lead to both lakes. The Ruddock, Shell Bank Bayou, and Sunset Park Boat Launches are all popular ramps that residents and swamp tour companies both utilize as an entrance into the unique forested wetlands that give way to Lake Maurepas. These public launches have limited parking space forcing residents to park on the shoulder of Old US 51. This is an illegal activity by DOTD standards, and cars parked on the shoulder are often ticketed by state troopers. On the eastern side of the isthmus is the Peavine Boat Launch, one of the only public boat launches on the west shore of Lake Pontchartrain. It juts out into the lake from the historical village of Frenier; however, due to a buildup of sediment and a lack of funds for regular dredging, the launch is often impassible and traps boats within the channel.

Half a mile north of Peavine Rd., the Maurepas Swamp Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Nature Trail extends into a portion of the wetland forest between Old US 51 and Lake Pontchartrain. Signs at the trailhead warn visitors they are entering bear territory, and inform them that the area is a wildlife restoration area. The trail offers glimpses into a wild swamp that is filled with flooded lands and cypress trees that the region is so famous for. The swampy nature sometimes comes at a price: the earthen trial



is often muddy and hard to navigate, and the flora can become so overgrown that it obstructs views of the wetland forest. Much further north, approximately 12 miles towards Pass Manchac, is Sunset Park, an area that gives members of the public a chance to eat and rest under pavilions with a view of Lake Maurepas just past the interstate.

Because the Manchac Greenway is located on an isthmus, or landbridge, it has access to two different lakes on either side: Lake Maurepas to the west, and Lake Pontchartrain to the east. Both lakes offer a wealth of opportunities for fishing and watersports. Lake Pontchartrain is the largest lake in Louisiana and has a host of recreational opportunities along its shoreline from bike paths in New Orleans to walking paths in Fontainebleau State Park on the North Shore. Its waters attract anglers from across the region looking to catch speckled trout and redfish. Comparatively, Lake Maurepas is overlooked. No towns, cities, or developments exist on its shores except for at the far eastern corner at Pass Manchac. Lake Maurepas is a serene water body filled with catfish and bream surrounded by cypress swamp, a picturesque postcard scene in an overlooked area of Louisiana.



Figure 5 & 6 Sunset Park

## GOALS

The following goals are identified as critical in moving forward with development of Manchac Greenway:

- Improve access to outdoor recreation to promote active lifestyles for the health and wellbeing of parish residents;
- Increase connectivity for multi-modal, sustainable transportation;
- Support economic development through eco-tourism opportunities;
- Protect and preserve wetlands, wildlife habitat, and natural areas.

## IMPROVE ACCESS TO OUTDOOR RECRATION TO PROMOTE ACTIVE LIFESTYLES FOR THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF PARISH RESIDENTS

Bicycle paths connect people to places while providing the opportunity of physical activity at the same time. The majority of daily trips that people make are short; a greenway connected to trails provides the chance for residents to take short, medium, to long bike rides and walks in natural, scenic areas. Physical activity has myriad health benefits from helping to control weight and cholesterol levels, to helping prevent heart disease and depression. These benefits are especially pronounced in older adults, but are great preventive measures for younger people as well. A greenway is an effective, inexpensive



method for the Parish to promote physical activity, and invest in a healthy and sustainable future for the community.

#### INCREASE CONNECTIVITY FOR MULTI-MODAL, SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION

A greenway complete with bicycle infrastructure from end to end, as well as walking paths and boat launches that branch off from it, is a great model of multi-modal transportation. Residents of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds can walk, bike, or boat the canals and paths of the Manchac Greenway and reunite with the region's environmental and cultural heritage in a zero-emissions, sustainable way.

#### SUPPORT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ECO-TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES

Most of The Manchac Greenway will be located outside of the protective area afforded by the West Shore Lake Pontchartrain Risk Reduction levee making development along the path financially risky. Investing in eco-tourism is a relatively low-risk endeavor that encourages the protection of natural resources through low-impact development practices. Preserving and providing access to St. John the Baptist Parish's unique forested wetlands not only strengthens the relationship between residents and their environmental heritage, but also allows visitors an opportunity to enjoy nature-based experiences found in St. John the Baptist Parish.

#### PROTECT AND PRESERVE WETLANDS, WILDLIFE HABITAT, AND NATURAL AREAS

Long ago, logging companies pillaged the swamps of the Manchac Landbridge for hardy cypress wood, leaving indelible scars on the landscape still visible today. Although much of the damage to the swamp is irreversible, the Pontchartrain Conservancy has identified many areas where natural swamp regeneration is possible if development in the area is managed correctly. A restored swamp would help reestablish the area's once prized wildlife presence, while preserving the integrity of the wetlands, a natural defense and deterrent of storm surge.

#### **ACTION PLAN**

The following major steps are necessary to move forward with development of the Manchac Greenway:

1. Use RESTORE Act dollars to develop a Manchac Greenway Master Plan;
2. Improve multi-modal transportation and resilience;
3. Generate sustainable economic development;
4. Promote the Manchac Greenway as a model for sustainable development in Louisiana.

#### **STRATEGY 1: USE RESTORE ACT DOLLARS TO DEVELOP A MANCHAC GREENWAY MASTER PLAN**

The Friends of the Manchac Greenway have achieved great success in establishing a greenway along the landbridge. However, the development of a master plan is necessary for the continued improvement of the greenway. Organizations such as the Regional Planning Commission (RPC) and the Louisiana Land Trust have communicated that the development of a master plan is necessary to channel future grant funds to the greenway. The Friends of the Manchac Greenway organization has reached its limit on its capacity for implementing its vision. It has gone as far as it can without the intervention of an entity like St. John the Baptist Parish government.

**ACTION:** *Hire a firm to develop a master plan for the Manchac Greenway.*

This is a very efficient use of St. John the Baptist Parish’s portion of RESORE funds. Under the direct component of the *Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act* (RESTORE Act), St. John the Baptist Parish is allocated a portion of the penalties in connection with the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. The Act requires funds be used for the ecological and economic restoration of the Gulf Coast region, and La. R.s 498:214.5.4(G) states that the funds “must be used for the purposes of integrated coastal protection and may be used only for those projects and programs that are consistent with...the master and annual plans for integrated coastal protection.” Activities that are deemed eligible under this definition include: restoration and protection of coastal wetlands, infrastructure projects benefitting the economy or ecological resources, and planning assistance.

**STRATEGY 2: IMPROVE MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION AND RESILIENCE**

Building a pedestrian network in St. John the Baptist Parish is an investment in the community’s overall health and wellbeing. Pedestrian networks such as bicycle paths and sidewalks connect residents to services and recreational areas, as well as provide zero carbon transportation options. A desire for increased pedestrian and bicycle safety is a common theme throughout the St. John the Baptist Adaptation Strategy.

The necessity of social distancing amid the COVID-19 pandemic has placed more importance on recreational areas as essential to public health. Indeed, before the pandemic, numerous studies revealed that green space and nature have salubrious effects on a city’s population, including a positive correlation between green space and physical activity. For this reason, Strategy 1 of Goal 5 in the Parish Adaptation Strategy calls for the continuous improvement of recreational opportunities.



*Figure 6: Multimodal transportation*

**ACTION:** *Improve the current bike path from a shared road to a designated and protected bike lane.*

In this way, residents can safely travel by bicycle from LaPlace to many of the attractions in the area like the restaurants in Frenier and Akers, and even further on to Ponchatoula and Hammond. A new bicycle path will help culturally connect the region by providing a sustainable transportation option between regional events, such as the Andouille and Strawberry Festivals. The Manchac Greenway will eventually stand as a main pillar in the *Ring around the Lake* bicycle path concept that will connect all of the communities on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.



**ACTION:** *Establish bike path and greenway design standards.*

The *One Parish, One Future* Comprehensive Master Plan calls for the development of greenways along the drainage canals that stretch away from the river levees into communities as safe and direct non-motorized transportation routes in close proximity to populated residential neighborhoods. Establishing design standards for the Manchac Greenway will help move the Parish close to building these future greenways.

### **STRATEGY 3: GENERATE SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

LaPlace, Frenier, Reserve, and Garyville all abut the Maurepas Swamp forested wetlands, which cover around 96,257 acres, around 71%, of the parish. The great cypress forests have attracted many commercial interests over the years. In the late 1800's logging companies carved miles of canals through the landscape to gain access to the virgin forest. The damages they left behind are still present today: the lush swamp on the tip of the landbridge is now a denuded marsh, and the radial scars left by pull-boats can be seen via satellite. Starting in the 1950's, canals and wells were dug for oil exploration. The oil economy waned after the 1990's, but the access roads and canals remained.

The St. John the Baptist Parish Coastal Zone Management Plan sets forth an objective to "enhance economic development in St. John the Baptist Parish through construction of more coastal restoration projects, and through the promotion of ecotourism." The Parish will benefit from a low-impact economic development strategy that reduces threats to its biodiversity, while giving economic value to its natural resources and the ecosystem services they provide.

**ACTION:** *Create a small area plan for the Frenier area.*

Articulate a vision to guide the growth and investment into the Frenier area in a way that is ecologically sustainable and equitable using Regional Planning Commission funds. The small area plan should provide goals on improving existing businesses and recreational assets, as well as provide a strategy to attract new eco-friendly businesses and acquiring funds to invest in new recreational amenities. The small area plan should take into account the extent of the area's environmental sensitivity, and provide suggestions for land use development standards and guidelines. The plan should consider the historical significance of the wetlands and the town of Frenier to the cultural identity of St. John the Baptist and seek to enhance it. For example, a Wetlands Educational Center would honor the region's heritage while simultaneously educating the region about the importance of wetlands. This action is supported by the "high priority" *Lake Pontchartrain Park* project proposal in the *One Parish, One Future: Building Back Better and Stronger* project list.

**ACTION:** *Promote the Manchac Greenway as a signature attraction for St. John.*

The Manchac Greenway has the potential to be a signature attraction for St. John the Baptist Parish. The Parish can coordinate with the River Parish Tourist Commission (RPTC) to promote the greenway under its umbrella of branded topics, such as "New Orleans Swamp Country" and "Outdoor Recreation." A multitude of businesses already exist on the greenway, and not all of them are promoted on the RPTC's website. As the Parish adds amenities and enhances economic development of the greenway, it will help to establish an identity that will attract visitors looking for authentic Louisiana experiences.

#### STRATEGY 4: PROMOTE THE MANCHAC GREENWAY AS A MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR LOUISIANA

Louisiana is a model for the entire country in building coastal resilience. The State has designed a resilience framework based on the coast-wide strategies put forth in the Coastal Master Plan, along with the community based planning endeavors of the LA SAFE program. St. John the Baptist Parish has aligned itself with State-led initiatives and created its own community resilience framework based on policy, regulations, capital projects, and land use. The Manchac Greenway will be a pillar in the parish resilience framework, and will serve as a model for utilizing nature based solutions to strengthen and protect community.



Figures 7 & 8: Louisiana Tourism Commission

**ACTION:** *Introduce the Manchac Greenway to State agencies.*

Conduct outreach to different State agencies that operate in the region, such as DNR, CPRA, FWL, OCD, to introduce them to the Manchac Greenway. Making State agencies aware of the greenway will aid coordination between State and Parish-led initiatives. Input the Manchac Greenway as a project within the Region 7 project inventory list of the Louisiana Watershed Initiative. Contact the CPRA to coordinate the creation of an enhanced greenway with the marsh creation modeling work the authority is conducting for the 2023 update of the Coastal Master Plan.

**ACTION:** *Promote the Manchac Greenway and its amenities in the Louisiana, Feed Your Soul promotion outlets run by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor.*

Lobby the Louisiana Office of Tourism to add the Manchac Greenway as a unique Louisiana attraction. For example, the lists of *Louisiana's Best Biking Trails* and *Louisiana's Family Friendly Biking Trails*. Additionally, lobby for better promotion of the greenway and the community of LaPlace in the *Louisiana Byways & Trails* system, specifically the *Southern Swamp Byway* that runs from LaPlace, on to Pontchatoula, and ending in Sorrento.