

Civic participation, trust, getting to know people: Together Baton Rouge gets things done

BY JACK BARLOW

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From left, Dianne Hanley of Together Baton Rouge speaks alongside Rev. Lee Wesley and Rev. Clee Earnest Lowe during a press conference on the steps of City Hall before a meeting of the metro council, Wednesday, January 23, 2019, in downtown Baton Rouge, La.

The makeup of Together Baton Rouge's meetings brings to mind an old joke. A priest, a rabbi and minister walk into a ...

Well, maybe not a bar.

But Together Baton Rouge is often like that, bringing together a broad, often unlikely, mix of community members and groups to tackle a common goal.

In the group's 13-year history, it's taken on everything from closed bridges in underserved communities to powerful industrial tax exemptions. If the group identifies something that can help the community, no issue too large or too small is off the table.

While the group formed in 2010, its beginnings stretch back to 2008 when a coalition of Black pastors began discussing ways to tackle social issues in Baton Rouge. Fairly quickly, they realized that in order to effect deep change, reaching out to different sections of the community would be crucial.

"It was clear to us early on that if we were going to have an impact on the community of Baton Rouge, it could not just be a handful of African American pastors," the late Rev. Lee Wesley said at the time. "It had to be a cross section of people across the city and the parish."

Their approach, formulated during that time, comes down to three basic goals: relationship building, equipping members with the skills needed to get results, and a focus on achieving change with concrete issues.

Its interim leader organizer is Edgar Cage. A Baton Rouge native and Southern University alumni, Cage spent decades in the health insurance industry, including time as a senior manager at health care company Blue Shield of California. He became involved in what would become Together Baton Rouge upon his return to the area from California in 2009, with a particular interest in food deserts in north Baton Rouge. ("It was really, really bad," he said. "An injustice.")

Cage said the group was "an organization of organizations" that placed particular emphasis on leadership and relationships.

"We're really about civic participation," Cage said. "We all have to trust each other before we can get things done. Our main focus is relational, getting to know people. When Together Baton Rouge formed, we wanted to reach the rich and the poor, Democrats, Republicans, social workers. What we want to do is to encompass as much of the community as we can."

The group has a wide range of member institutions, exemplifying the broad community reach its members talk about. While many of these institutions are often either faith-based or left-leaning, they vary from issue to issue. On a recent campaign, the group worked alongside sheriff's deputies, places few would accuse of being hotbeds of bleeding heart liberalism.

The group's earliest notable success came with the reopening of a bridge on Blue Grass Drive that had been closed by the city and not reopened, leaving residents in the lurch.

"Someone got sick. The ambulance didn't even know how to get in here," north Baton Rouge resident Dorothy Thomas later told *The Advocate*.

Led by Thomas and the group, enough pressure was placed on the East Baton Rouge Parish Metro Council that it eventually reopened the bridge. It was a sign of things to come.

In 2012, the group used classic grassroots organizing tactics to beat the odds and get out enough voters to help pass a tax funding the cash-strapped Capital Area Transportation System, without which it could have ceased to function.

Since then, the group has a long list of accomplishments to point toward, including helping with everything from Medicaid expansion to restoring emergency room services to north Baton Rouge. Recent programs include assisting sister organization Together New Orleans on the Community Lighthouse project, which intends to create a network of "resiliency hubs," each with commercial-scale solar power and backup battery capacity, that will keep communities powered in the event of a power outage.

It has also focused on Louisiana's Industrial Tax Exemption Program, a lucrative corporate tax break. The campaign to rein in the program, which opponents viewed as overly generous, was one of its highest-profile efforts.

"ITEP was set up as an incentive, but it was turned into a gift," Cage said. "We didn't say we shouldn't have it if it's creating long-term, permanent jobs. But is it?"

The program was eventually restructured by Gov. John Bel Edwards during his first term as governor, giving local sheriffs, parish leaders and school boards a vote on whether to grant the tax breaks. Moreover, according to a study from think tank Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis, in conjunction with another sister organization, Together Louisiana, the restructure brought in \$282 million in tax revenue in 2021. Still, it's uncertain if Edwards' changes will survive beyond his administration: a proposal to enshrine them in the state constitution failed last year.

The group has occasionally bumped heads with various local institutions over the years, including former gubernatorial candidate Eddie Rispone. Members say that's not surprising. Bucking the status quo, they say, was always likely to ruffle a few feathers.

From humble beginnings, the group has become one of Baton Rouge's most vocal, and effective, community organizations.

"We do our research, our due diligence, about what other parts of the country are doing," Cage said. "When we come forward with something, we know the answer."

"We have grown tremendously. More so, we've grown effectively. We've been able to grow the capacity of our power to get things done."