



Does state still have 2020 Vision?

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BATON ROUGE -- In 1999, the Legislature adopted Vision 2020, a comprehensive plan to advance Louisiana, but some officials are wondering if events since then have clouded that vision.

A massive report, Vision 2020 was the result of months of study by a think tank of people in numerous livelihoods with the overall goal of improving the state. The report, adopted under former Gov. Mike Foster, reflected some of the same goals of the Secure Plan, a previous think tank study adopted under former Gov. Buddy Roemer.

In the first years of Vision 2020, numerous pieces of legislation, such as reorganizing the Department of Economic Development, revising tax codes, advancing highway funds and increasing education spending, were adopted as fulfilling some of the goals of the plan.

As this year's update of the plan states, "Louisiana must continue with its significant and sustained efforts to change the way it does business. While the new Louisiana called for in Vision 2020 will be a better place economically, educationally, and environmentally, it should remain identifiably Louisiana, a place like no other."

But since numerous things have affected the state since Vision 2020 went into effect, some state government observers and participants say the plan has been shoved back on a shelf with Secure.

"I think it's time we dust off that document and look at it again," said Sen. Mike Michot, R-Lafayette, vice chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee. "There are many areas that have not been addressed and I'm afraid they're being tossed aside."

Michot said there's no need to appoint another study panel to draft a plan for the future because it's likely to come to the same conclusions. "We need to do a better job of health care, transportation and education," he said. "It's not rocket science or new ideas."

House Commerce Committee Chairman Rep. Gil Pinac, D-Crowley, said that although Vision 2020 rarely rears its head publicly, "it's still alive and well. It's been incorporated into the recovery plans for the southeast and southwest, where they're trying to have economic survival. No, it has not been in the forefront because we've been in recovery mode."

Jim Brandt, head of the Public Affairs Research Council, said that although Vision 2020 "was a buzzword for a couple of years," he hasn't heard anything about it for a long time and he was surprised to learn that there's a yearly update.

The latest update, submitted by the Louisiana Economic Development Council in March, refers to the recovery efforts following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita but also focuses on other subjects.

Several of the LEDC's suggestions in the update were achieved by the Legislature this year but not mentioned as being part of Vision 2020.

Included are: reorganizing workforce training; expanding the Louisiana Optical Network Initiative (LONI) to all research universities; maintaining operational funding for the Louisiana Immersion Technology Enterprise (LITE) at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette; maintaining capital funding for the New Orleans life sciences incubator and support the startup of incubators in Shreveport and Baton Rouge; maintaining or increasing funding for pre-kindergarten programs; and solving "the problem of legacy lawsuits that serve as a disincentive for companies to locate in Louisiana."

"I'm not sure how relevant it (the overall plan) is, given the magnitude of what we're dealing with in Louisiana," Brandt said. "It's broad and general, sort of a God and Motherhood piece that's hard to argue with. It lists goals but not how to achieve them."

"Under 'Tax Structure,' it doesn't recommend anything but for another task force to look at it. It's not a blue print. There's just not a lot of meat on the bones. It laments the fact that we're at the bottom of a lot of lists but doesn't provide any guidance as to how to get off the bottom."

Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana, said "we shouldn't throw Vision 2020 away and we shouldn't leave it on a shelf."

The plan sets goals for improving the state's economic future and "even before the storms, we had a lot of problems. Vision 2020 attempted to address them all."

Erwin said the Blanco administration needs to address much more than storm recovery.

"The storms have been a big setback and a distraction from focusing on our long-term economic future," he said. "If we don't focus on the big picture, the storms will have dealt us a double blow. They would have also kept us from addressing fundamental thing to get off the bottom of lists."

Vision 2020 might no longer be a driving force in setting state policies because it's not the current administration's plan, he said. Under the Foster administration, "there was an attempt to use it as a framework, as a policy initiative, for change."

"That's a problem when you have a document created in another administration. There's a problem with ownership. I don't know that they're using it the same way as Gov. Foster's administration."

Michot agrees that Vision 2020 is not the driving force that it once was but "I don't think this administration is not addressing the same issues. They just might not give Vision 2020 the credit."

Pinac said the administration's shift from being totally in recovery mode to seeking commercial developments in other parts of the state reflects "the Blanco administration is still aware of it and is mapping a course that is business friendly."

The attention to workforce development is straight from Vision 2020, he said, and "if the Blanco administration's elimination of various business taxes is not part of Vision 2020, it should be."

