Jan Risher
LOUISIANA AT LARGE

More than Raising Cane's chicken

Since October, I've documented a different Louisiana adventure every week. Friends and coworkers often pitch ideas — and I'm always grateful.

But when fellow writer Lauren Cheramie told me that Raising Cane's Golden Birthday contest winners were visiting Baton Rouge and suggest I join their ride-along, I was skeptical.

"Really?" I said. "They're coming to Baton Rouge, and they're going to do what?"

Which is how, a few weeks ago, I found myself heading downtown to the company's Baton Rouge Support Office to meet the winners, who turned out to be Rebecca and Todd Hayes, of West Chester, Ohio.

With a photographer and videographer in tow, Erin Credo, with the Cane's marketing department, led us on a "tour" of the offices.

We passed screens showing live shots from Cane's locations worldwide and got a glimpse of the company's enthusiastic culture in the marketing department. Credo shared details like when employees have worked at Cane's for a year, they get a hard hat, "reminiscent of when Todd (Graves), our founder, was a boilermaker."

"When you've been here for five years, you get a sockeye salmon," Credo said. "When you've been here for 10 years, you get a crystal dog."

Then, we went into a meeting room to chat. Rebecca Hayes sat to my immediate right, and

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N.O. East cultural district designation OK'd

City Council unanimously backs move

BY DESIREE STENNETT
Staff writer

A stretch of New Orleans East anchored by Lake Forest Boulevard could soon become a state-recognized cultural district after City Council members voted unanimously Thursday to approve a request to apply for the designation.

If the area bound by Dwyer Boulevard, Mayo Road, Michoud Boulevard and the southern Interstate 10 Service Road becomes the Lake Forest Cultural District, business owners and residents would be able to apply for thousands of dollars in grants from the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development. The money would be available for beautification projects, branding and marketing for area businesses and other efforts that would benefit the whole district, which includes the former Six Flags site, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, Joe W. Brown Park, several restaurants and entertainment venues and other small businesses and community gathering places.

The designation could be a game changer, helping New Orleans East step out from New Orleans' shadow and showcase itself as a

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Officials question energy companies

100K left without power on Sunday

BY ALEX LUBBEN
Staff writer

A day after widespread outages left around 100,000 homes and businesses without power in the New Orleans area, utilities stressed that the grid now appears stable, but local officials vowed to press for answers over how and why it occurred.

The outages on Sunday hit homes served by Entergy and Cleco in parts of Orleans, Jefferson, St. Tammany, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. The popular Greek Festival along Bayou St. John was also affected, forcing it to take cash only for a period of time and extend its hours with free entry.

Both Entergy and Cleco said that, while they did not anticipate further outages, they were continuing to monitor the grid. Power was restored Sunday night.

The utilities have indicated that the "load-shed" outage was ordered to protect critical infrastructure from sustaining more serious damage. High electricity demand due to scorching May temperatures, combined with low electricity supply from a nuclear generator being out of commission and a second power plant going offline, led to the outages.

Utilities and the grid operator stressed that, had power not been cut, the damage to infrastructure could have been worse.

"If the power supply cannot meet the demand, periodic power outages could be needed to protect the stability of the power grid and prevent widespread lengthy outages," said Jennifer Cahill, Cleco's director of corporate communications. "This was the case yesterday when we took the unprecedented step, as directed by MISO, to force outages to some customers in St. Tammany Parish."

Entergy, the electrical utility that

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STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE

The volunteer-operated BMX track in Gretna is the only of its kind in the New Orleans area.

BMX budget cut

New Parish Council member says money needs to go to disaster relief

BY LARA NICHOLSON
Staff writer

Jefferson Parish's newest council member cut more than $1 million in funds for a Gretna project at his first council meeting, fulfilling campaign promises to vastly change how discretionary funds have been spent within his district in recent years.

Kerner

District 1 council member Timothy Kerner Jr., the former Jean Lafitte mayor sworn in earlier this month, de-obligated $1.5 million in funds Wednesday that were allocated for renovations to Gretna's BMX track, including adding a covering, restrooms and concession stand.

Kerner said the project already has $4.9 million from a community development grant to complete its first phase, an allocation he also chided. He said the parish will seek more funds from the state and other sources for the project's completion.

The decision came after several families who use that track, as well as the national BMX organization, spoke against the cuts, saying the local track desperately needed those upgrades.

"My grandson lost his father in 2018; the BMX track helped him to cope with that loss. It has done things you wouldn't imagine," said Cindy Aarons, who brings her grandson to the track three times a week from Lacombe. "We ask you, please, let the funds stay where they are."

The volunteer-operated BMX track in Gretna is the only of its kind in the New Orleans area, and people travel from as far as Lafayette and Biloxi, Mississippi, according to Justin Travis, coaching director for USA BMX.

The track is open Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, although when it rains — as it often does in south Louisiana — the track must close down, which has hindered its ability to attract events like the BMX National Championships.

Kerner originally proposed cutting $7.1 million in projects at his debut meeting, including $4.5 million from the hospital fund to help construct a new drug court. He deferred that pullback Wednesday, saying he'd like to discuss alternative funding options further with the council and parish judges.

He said he supported projects like the BMX track and the new drug court, but would like time to review them to ensure they are as efficient as possible.

For now, the BMX track renovations will pull from a $4.9 million community development block grant for disaster recovery that was approved by the State Office of Community Development in March. That grant will also pay for streetscape and drainage improvements in the area.

Kerner called the use of a disaster

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Former La. Sen. Vitter to consult for Denmark

Country looks to build relationship with Trump

BY MARK BALLARD
Staff writer

WASHINGTON – Denmark has turned to former Louisiana U.S. Sen. David Vitter to build "warmer relations" with President Donald Trump, who has set his sights on acquiring Greenland, according to EUobserver, a nonprofit news publication covering the European Union and based in Belgium.

Vitter

Citing a filing with the U.S. State Department, the news outlet reported that Denmark's Washington ambassador, Jesper Møller Sørensen, has agreed to a contract with Washington-based Mercury Public Affairs worth $263,000.

Vitter, who joined Mercury after choosing not to run for a third term in 2016, was named as handling the contract to provide "strategic consulting."

Greenland is an autonomous Danish territory rich in mineral resources that Trump has said repeatedly should be part of the United States. Trump says he wants to buy Greenland but refused to rule out military intervention.

Greenland's population doesn't want to join the U.S. and Danish Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen said the territory is not for sale.

Vitter has lobbied on behalf of a Chinese surveillance company, the Libyan government and a Russian bank.

As a Republican from Metairie, Vitter sat in the U.S. House seat now occupied by House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, from 1999 to 2005. He replaced retiring Sen. John Breaux, D-Crowley, in 2005 and served in the U.S. Senate until 2017.

Vitter ran for governor in 2015, but lost to former Gov. John Bel Edwards.

BMX

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recovery grant for a recreational facility instead of coastal communities "heartless," and said he could have fought to have the grant pulled back but chose not to, so the first phase of the BMX track renovation could proceed.

"I ran on winning young families back," Kerner said. "I want everyone to know, I had every right to go and fight that CDBG money, because that money was meant for human suffering and underserved communities."

The grant is intended for disaster relief, infrastructure restoration and economic revitalization after the storms and hurricanes of 2020 and 2021, including Hurricane Ida. In the project's grant application, it says the protective cover will prevent the track from recurring flooding during storms, which requires rebuilding and resurfacing after each flood.

Gretna targeted

Marion Edwards, Kerner's predecessor who retired suddenly late last year, agreed in 2023 to contribute $1.5 million in discretionary funds derived from the West Jefferson Medical Center lease, which is earmarked for West Bank council members for health-related projects.

District council members each have pots ripe with millions of dollars in cash to spend at their discretion, often with few restrictions. Kerner made it a focal point of his campaign, saying too much has been concentrated in downtown Gretna and not enough in other parts of the district, which spans all the way down to Grand Isle.

His comments left Gretna officials — who he now represents and works with — feeling alienated and untrusting, they said at the time.

"It's simply not fair to spend nearly every dollar of discretionary funds in one community while others are left behind," Kerner said in a text message Thursday.

Gretna Mayor Belinda Constant said she and Kerner spoke Tuesday night before the meeting to compromise on the decision to pull the hospital money. But she said the comments about the $4.9 million grant made her feel like Gretna "got slapped a little bit."

"He did what he needed to do politically, and I understand politics," Constant added. "I'm walking away still feeling like we're going to work together."

Kerner said Thursday he looks forward to working with residents and officials across his district, including in Gretna. He said he has not yet identified where the newfound $1.5 million in discretionary funds will go.

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RISHER

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PHOTO BY GUS STARK

Todd Graves, from left, Raising Cane's founder, and Cane III sit with Todd Hayes and Rebecca Hayes, of West Chester, Ohio, winners of the Raising Cane's Golden Birthday prize trip to Baton Rouge.

the first thing I noticed was that she was wearing a chunky silver necklace with a heart charm engraved with the word "Hunter." Something right then and there told me the piece of jewelry played a significant role in a story that went far beyond Cane's.

We began to chat. She quietly explained that she had entered the contest on a whim.

"I was shocked when they called and said I was the fourth place winner, which was a trip to Baton Rouge to see the headquarters," she said.

At first, she thought it was a scam but was eventually convinced it was real.

"I have five kids, um, four that are living," she said. "My, my son passed away last year. We have two older kids out of the house and on their own, and then I have a 26-year-old that's in med school, starting her third-year rotations."

She added that their youngest daughter is graduating high school this year.

Rebecca Hayes' only request for the trip to Baton Rouge was to meet Cane III, Graves' dog.

"The reason I know about Cane I, II and III is several years ago, my son who passed away, and my youngest daughter and I were in Cane's," she said. "We happened to go inside that day and were reading the walls and they had this story. We have four dogs. We love dogs — so that has a special place to me too."

We were quiet for a minute.

The atmosphere felt like she wanted to talk more about her son, so I asked about her necklace.

"Yes, Hunter is my son's name," she said. "He just made people laugh. He had a great heart, and we miss him a lot. He would've had a blast here. He loved Cane's. I would buy the sauce so that we could have it with everything. He loved chicken quesadillas — so he'd have Cane's sauce on chicken quesadillas."

The couple said their trip to Baton Rouge was their first trip since their son's death. They weren't sure they were up for it but knew they needed something light — silly even.

As I sat with them, I couldn't help but consider how we just never know someone else's story. I thought I was going on a lighthearted adventure that turned out to be about something much bigger than expected. This wasn't about Cane's; it was about parents grieving and trying to figure out how to put the pieces of their lives back together again.

As we walked out of the offices, Rebecca Hayes told me that their two older children were originally foster children, whom they adopted. The two middle children, including Hunter, were biological — and the youngest? They adopted her from China.

I explained that my husband and I also adopted our younger daughter from China. Remarkably, our daughters are from the same city in China. We had taken separate journeys, at different times, but we had all been to this same faraway place.

Our next stop was the apartment where Graves lived when he started Cane's — now restored to its 1996 glory with huge desktop computers, the same bedspread, the same cereal boxes on top of the refrigerator and the same beer inside.

I thought about all the ways we try to hold onto the past — to people, to moments, to the ones we've loved and lost.

I came for a story about fried chicken. I left with a story about love, loss and the strange and beautiful ways our paths cross.

And maybe that's the real heart of any good adventure — not just where it takes you, but who you meet along the way.

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EAST

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STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER

The Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans East stands out in the distance near an apartment complex in need of repair on Friday. This area is part of the proposed Lake Forest Cultural District.

cultural center in its own right, said Kimberly Burbank, who, with the help of other business owners, spearheaded the effort to win the designation.

The East is ready, she said, adding that culture bearers are already doing some of that work with limited support. As examples, she cited festivals at the park and concerts at Franklin Avenue Baptist Church.

"We have to acknowledge that we have arts and culture happening," said Burbank, who owns Palesa Development, a real estate development company on Lake Forest. "We're not just a suburb of New Orleans."

Burbank said if the district is approved, the state benefits are just a start.

If leaders in New Orleans East can successfully showcase the area's best assets, it could draw more tourism, private investment and philanthropic support too. And with the renewed investment and attention on reopening Lincoln Beach and the potential development of the former Six Flags site, a designated cultural district would only add to the momentum in the East, said New Orleans East resident Tangee Wall.

"Lake Forest Boulevard is absolutely the perfect place that brings all of these major corridors together," she said. "This is the door opener."

In the coming years, Lake Forest could see a revitalization that rivals places like Freret Street, Bayou Road and Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, Burbank said. She and others are even drawing inspiration from the public art projects along Loyola Drive in Kenner and the investment in the Lafitte Greenway for pedestrians.

Burbank pointed to a winding walkway off Lake Forest between Wright Road and Reed Boulevard used by residents in the Lake Forest Estates and Idlewild communities. Though it is just a quarter of the length of the Greenway, the impact of the millions of dollars invested in the Greenway — which led to private development, new businesses and more public art — shows what potential investment could mean for the walking path in the East.

District D council member Eugene Green supported the idea, adding that it is time to expand the often limited view of where culture can happen in New Orleans.

"We as a city concentrate maybe sometimes too much on certain communities and say that those are our cultural meccas, if you will," Green said. "This helps us to recognize that there's a lot of culture in our city and a lot of economic development in our city that takes place outside of what everybody considers because of what the media focuses on."

And for District E council member Oliver Thomas, who represents New Orleans East and is running for mayor, this is the beginning of a long overdue acknowledgment of the area's political and economic power. A "city within a city," the East is one of the most populated areas in the state, Thomas added, and few local offices can be won without courting the area's residents.

"Why shouldn't there be historic districts, cultural districts, economic development districts, special taxing districts," in New Orleans East? he asked. "It's about time now that it not be treated like it's on the other side of the High Rise; it's an extension of New Orleans."

Commelita McKee, a member of the advocacy organization New Orleans East Matters, said this is a chance for the East to highlight its cultural significance. Any economic boost from the designation would lift not just the cultural district, but the entire East and the rest of the city, she added.

"It's a huge step toward getting back to where we were and going beyond that point," McKee said. "I think that enhances all of New Orleans when we're able to do that."

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ENERGY

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serves the New Orleans area, also said it would continue to monitor the grid closely.

"Entergy continues to work with MISO to understand their directive yesterday to suddenly shed load," said Beau Tidwell, an Entergy spokesperson. "While at this time we do not anticipate the need to ask customers to conserve electricity or to implement any load-shedding measures, our teams remain prepared to respond quickly should conditions change."

Andy Kowalczyk, the transmission director for Southern Renewable Energy Association, a trade organization that advocates for renewable energy companies, noted, too, that if the power hadn't been cut, it could have led to significant damage to infrastructure that could have taken a long time to fix.

"We could have had harmonics issues that are blowing up transformers" and damaging substations, he said, leading to the type of cascading power outages that led to a major blackout that affected around 50 million people in the Northeast in 2003.

The outage raises questions about why the spike in electricity usage caught MISO, the grid operator that ordered the outage, off guard, local officials said. Some also alleged that MISO granted only a short notice for the outage directive.

"High temperatures in Louisiana led to higher-than-expected demand, and with planned and unplanned transmission and generation outages, MISO needed to take this action as a very last resort," the grid operator said in a statement on X on Sunday evening.

MISO did not respond to a request for further comment.

Davante Lewis, who represents the New Orleans area on the statewide Public Service Commission, which regulates utilities, was among those raising questions about why the forecasts for energy usage underestimated electricity demand on Sunday.

"We know that (the Department of Government Efficiency) has made large cuts to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration , which is responsible for producing the weather forecasts" that are used by MISO to predict energy demand, Lewis said. "If there is a situation where we are now getting faulty weather and faulty climate data that's making it hard … to adequately predict demand, then this could become a serious problem that we're going to be facing more frequently."

He noted that a similar power outage was ordered in Shreveport earlier this month for similar reasons, and he worries that there may be a larger problem with the forecasting that MISO is using to predict electricity usage.

Two nuclear power plants, both operated by Entergy, were out of commission Friday and remained so Sunday, according to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission's website and local officials. One was down for planned maintenance. The other went offline last week, and "tripped" as Entergy tried to bring it back online, Lewis said.

It was not clear Monday what caused the plant to unexpectedly go dark. One of the two was back online Monday.

Lewis noted that maintenance on power plants is often scheduled for the spring, when electricity demand is typically lower than it is at the height of summer or in the depths of winter, when households use power to heat or cool their homes.

Eric Skrmetta, who also serves on the Public Service Commission, laid the blame firmly on MISO. "I have not been able to get MISO to tell me why the outage was necessary," he said. "We're going to have a fight."

Who is to blame, and what exactly caused the power outage, will be subject to public scrutiny in the days ahead. Lewis said he and New Orleans City Council Vice President Helena Morena would organize a joint Public Service Commission and City Council hearing with Entergy and MISO, though that hearing has not yet been scheduled. Skrmetta indicated that the outage would be front and center at the next commission meeting June 18.

While public officials may be quick to cast blame, Kowalczyk stressed that figuring out exactly what happened will take time.

"It will take a month or two to get to the root cause here," he said. "It's not about who is at fault, primarily. It's about what is at fault."

He noted that the South is about a decade behind where it should be in terms of planning for improvements to the grid.

"We need a more robust system," he noted. "But transmission takes a while to build. Energy efficiency would be great. More energy storage would be awesome. As would having a diversity of generation options."

LOTTERY

SUNDAY, MAY 25, 2025

PICK 3: 0-7-6

PICK 4: 1-1-8-6

PICK 5: 9-0-1-0-5

Unofficial notification, keep your tickets.