

Collaboration Is Driving the Bayou Region Forward

The strength of the Bayou Region has always been in its people and its ability to get things done. Across four parishes, businesses and industries have built a diverse economy supported by a skilled workforce, strong infrastructure and generations of experience in energy, maritime industries, agriculture, manufacturing and other critical sectors. Today, that foundation is creating new opportunities while also presenting challenges that require communities and industries to think beyond individual parish lines.

The work ahead is regional by nature. Growing the workforce, preparing for investment, supporting existing industries, improving infrastructure and addressing issues such as coastal protection and flood insurance all require people to work together. COLAB, as one of eight regional economic development organizations recognized by Louisiana Economic Development, helps facilitate that regional approach by connecting partners, supporting initiatives and advocating for the interests of the Bayou Region. Over the past year, that work has taken many forms, from bringing regional leaders together to supporting workforce development, business investment, industry growth and regional advocacy.

Leadership development remains a key part of that effort. COLAB has graduated two cohorts of its CEO Roundtable Program and is currently working with its third cohort, bringing regional executives together for candid peer discussion and a deeper understanding of the issues shaping businesses across the four-parish region. The program is building a growing network of business leaders who can share perspectives, identify opportunities and strengthen connections across industries and parish lines.

That regional leadership was also highlighted at the fourth annual Bayou Business Summit in August. The summit brought together business and industry leaders, educators, elected officials and community partners to discuss workforce, energy, defense, maritime manufacturing, technology and regional growth. COLAB also recognized Roger Beaudean, Hank Danos and K&B Industries with our inaugural Bayou Champions Awards, while Senator Robert Allain was named COLAB's first Legislative Champion. The recognition highlighted individuals and organizations making meaningful contributions to the region's economic growth.

Workforce development continues to be another major focus. COLAB is working with employers, educational institutions and workforce partners to connect industry needs with education and training programs. That work includes student career exploration, manufacturing exposure, energy workforce initiatives and the Bayou Region Energy Leadership Series, developed with SCIA, AIC and Louisiana Future Energy. The quarterly series connects emerging and mid-career professionals with industry leaders and gives participants a broader understanding of Louisiana's energy economy and the opportunities ahead.

The region is also seeing significant private investment across established and emerging industries. Saronic Technologies' \$300 million expansion of its Franklin shipyard is expected to create 1,500 direct jobs and an estimated 1,770 additional indirect jobs at full employment. The project adds more than 300,000 square feet of shipyard capacity, three new slips, expanded warehouse space and a production line for large vessel assembly. More importantly, it connects the Bayou Region's longstanding shipbuilding and maritime workforce with autonomous vessel production and the growing national defense industry.

Saronic is part of a broader defense manufacturing story in the region. Bollinger Shipyards' work on the U.S. Coast Guard's Fast Response Cutter program supports more than 650 jobs at its Lockport facility and a supplier network extending across 37 states. The continuation of that program reinforces the Bayou Region's role in national defense manufacturing and demonstrates how the region's shipbuilders, manufacturers and suppliers contribute to a broader industrial base.

In Terrebonne Parish, NovaSpark Energy announced a separate \$30 million investment in a Houma manufacturing facility for atmospheric hydrogen systems. The project is expected to create 240 direct jobs in Houma, with additional indirect jobs projected, and expands the region's role in advanced energy manufacturing. The technology has applications in both energy and defense, demonstrating how existing regional capabilities can support emerging industries and new markets.

COLAB's Coastal Technical Assistance Center, or CTAC, has also reached a significant milestone, with customer contracts connected to coastal activity surpassing \$1 billion. The program connects Louisiana businesses with opportunities associated with coastal restoration and protection, generating work for contractors, engineers, manufacturers and service providers while supporting projects that protect the region.

Preparing for future investment remains another priority. The Bayou Region now has six Certified Sites representing more than 1,300 acres of development ready property. In Lafourche Parish, a \$1.4 million FastSites investment is preparing 102 acres at McLeod Business Park for future development. That investment is part of a broader effort to ensure the region has sites, infrastructure and information ready when companies begin evaluating locations.

COLAB represented the Bayou Region at CERAWeek in Houston, bringing the region's energy story to one of the industry's largest global gatherings. The focus was on the workforce, infrastructure and decades of offshore energy experience that continue to make the Bayou Region an important part of Louisiana's energy economy.

The Houma Terrebonne Airport is also creating new opportunities through LIFTOff Louisiana, one of eight projects selected nationwide by the Federal Aviation Administration for its Advanced Air Mobility and eVTOL Integration Pilot Program. The initiative brings aviation, industry, education and government partners together to explore emerging technologies and the opportunities they could create for the Bayou Region.

Regional advocacy also took a more structured approach this year with the launch of COLAB's first Bayou Region Legislative Priorities guide. Developed ahead of Bayou Region Day at the Louisiana

State Capitol, the guide brought together shared priorities from Assumption, Lafourche, St. Mary and Terrebonne parishes and provided a clear framework for engaging state leaders. The priorities focus on issues that directly affect regional competitiveness, including workforce and technical education, higher education, transportation, ports and coastal protection. By presenting these priorities collectively, COLAB is helping ensure the Bayou Region speaks with a unified voice on issues that impact businesses, workers and communities across the four-parish region.

COLAB will also shepherd a regional coalition of partners focused on addressing the flood insurance crisis head on. Bringing together stakeholders from across the four-parish region, the coalition will work to better understand the challenges facing homeowners, businesses and communities, identify opportunities for action and advocate for solutions that address the long-term flood insurance needs of the Bayou Region. Flood risk affects every aspect of our region's economy and quality of life, making a coordinated regional response essential.

The future of the Bayou Region will depend on how well we work together to pursue the opportunities ahead. COLAB will continue bringing businesses, communities, and regional partners to the same table, advocating for the investments and policies that strengthen the region and putting the talent, knowledge and resources already here to work.

There will always be new challenges to address and new opportunities to pursue. The Bayou Region has the people, industries and institutions to meet them. Our responsibility is to answer the call, work collectively and make sure the voice of the Bayou Region is heard when decisions are being made about its future.

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