Baton Rouge airport enters 'a different era'

Authority transitions from city-parish to independent group

BY IANNE SALVOSA
Staff writer

For the first time in 50 years, the Baton Rouge airport has changed its governance model as it looks to improve services and talent development.

In a ceremony Tuesday morning at the airport's terminal rotunda, city and airport leaders gathered to celebrate the transition of authority from the city-parish to the Baton Rouge Regional Airport Authority, separating the airport from the local government. Airport leaders said the move will allow the facility to respond more quickly to changing airport needs and become a more formidable competitor for new services and employees.

Airport CEO Mike Edwards said the authority will prioritize expanding air service, infrastructure investment, improving customer experience and supporting economic development. Under the city-parish governance, actions like managing human resources or purchasing would need approval from the Metro Council and the mayor-president. Airport staffing was bound by city-parish civil service rules, and leadership was unable to create airport-specific roles.

Now, the airport can "move at the speed of business," Edwards said. The prior approval process could take up to two months but can now be condensed to two weeks, he said.

"Every generation has cared for this airport and has been entrusted with the same responsibility: Leave it better than you found it," Edwards said. "That responsibility now belongs to us."

Improving access to and from Baton Rouge is critical to the goals for the Capital Region, which is experiencing an increasing population and job growth in the industrial sector and carries a dream to become a larger player in the events and sports tourism industries. Tourism experts have said fortifying local airports is

➤ See **AIRPORT,** page **2B**



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN BALLANCE

A GOLDEN HONOR

Kevin Hall, president and publisher of Georges Media Group, right, presents The Advocate's Golden Deeds Award to Todd Terrell, founder of the United Cajun Navy, on Tuesday. Terrell was named the 2026 winner in recognition of his service to the Baton Rouge community.

Lawsuit targets fast-track data center process

Filing by advocacy groups accuses PSC of violating law

BY SAM KARLIN
Staff writer

A group of advocacy organizations filed a lawsuit Monday seeking to undo a rule that fast-tracked approval for billions of dollars in electric infrastructure for Meta's massive data center in north Louisiana, a move that could stymie Entergy's plans for several new gas-fired power plants.

The suit, filed in Baton Rouge district court, comes amid a wave of anti-AI sentiment across the country. The filings accuse the Louisiana Public Service Commission — which regulates electric utilities — of violating the law when it passed a "lightning directive" in December 2025 to speed up electric infrastructure for large projects, including Meta's data center. The plaintiffs are three groups who have opposed various aspects of Meta's data center: Save My Louisiana, Louisiana Citizens Advocacy Group and the Louisiana Landowners Coalition.

The lightning directive, passed at the behest of PSC member J.P. Coussan, a Republican from Lafayette, allows utilities like Entergy to skip some rules when building infrastructure to power certain high-energy users, including Meta's "Hyperion" data center.

The suit alleges that the PSC failed to properly notify the public before approving the lighting

➤ See **LAWSUIT,** page **2B**

Police: Man arrested in connection with fatal shooting of teen

CRIME BLOTTER
staff reports

A man has been arrested in connection with a May shooting that left a 15-year-old dead, Baton Rouge police said.

Jaquan Johnson, 31, was booked into East Baton Rouge Parish Prison on Friday on a count of manslaughter.

On May 20, 15-year-old Tyruan Dunn was found in the roadway of the 6900 block of Lobwood Drive suffering from multiple gunshot wounds. Dunn died at the scene, police said. A second victim had life-threatening injuries and was transported to a hospital.

At the time of his arrest, Johnson was already jailed on multiple gun counts, including armed robbery and illegal use of weapons. He is now facing $340,000 in bail for all of his counts.

Suspects arrested in LSU scooter thefts

A string of scooter thefts from the Nicholson Gateway apartment complex on the LSU campus led to the arrest of two armed suspects, police said.

A victim reported to the LSU Police Department that their electric scooter, locked to the bike rack at Oxbow Hall, had been stolen Oct. 17, prompting an investigation that revealed a string of scooter thefts.

➤ See **BLOTTER,** page **2B**

Former candidate for Ascension president testifies about tape

Lawsuit centers on claim of defamation

BY ANNAKATE FREELAND
Staff writer

A former candidate for Ascension Parish president whose secretly recorded conversation is at the center of a six-year legal battle took the stand Tuesday to testify about his allegations of defamation against a local insurance agent.

Murphy Painter Sr.'s lawsuit centers on a February 2019 conversation he had with local businessman Dustin Clouatre.

Painter claims a recording of the conversation was edited and published online at the Pelican Post News website in a way that falsely suggested he had helped



Painter

cover up allegations of child rape involving five girls younger than 12 while he was working at the Ascension Parish Sheriff's Office.

Opening statements were waived for the bench trial in front of Judge Michael Kirby. Instead, the Gonzales court heard Painter's testimony up to October 2019, when he dropped out of the president's race. Other witness testimonies will continue Thursday.

Painter testified that he agreed to meet with Clouatre at his Gonzales office because he believed they would discuss the possibility of using Clouatre's insurance company as the parish's insurer if Painter were elected as president.

The full hourlong audio tape revealed that they did not discuss the insurance proposal, but talked about Painter's previous careers in law enforcement, politics and what he would do if elected. Painter testified that the insurance subject came up as they were leaving the office, after the recording device had been left behind.

At one point in the recording, Painter can be heard asking Clouatre whether their conversation was confidential. Clouatre assured him that it was.

The recording later became the basis of a 49-second edited clip published alongside an article by the Pelican Post News in October 2019.

Painter said that after the conversation with Clouatre, he suspected it might surface in the

➤ See **TRIAL,** page **2B**

AIRPORT

Continued from page 1B

a key part to keeping up with the demand. Competition in the airport business is stiff too, thanks to a combination of federal deregulation, airline consolidation, the emergence of low-cost airlines and evolved pricing models.

Other Louisiana airports with an independent authority include the airports in Lafayette and Lake Charles.

In the past few years, the Baton Rouge airport has expanded its nonstop services with a direct flight to and from Washington, D.C., and plans for another direct route to and from Chicago.

The airport generates about $1.1 billion in economic impact on the city, said Bill Profita, chair of the Airport Authority and longtime Baton Rouge media professional. He hopes that grows under the new model.

"We are going to be able to take our economic plan and market this airport aggressively for new services, and we're also going to be able to take care of our employees in the way they should be taken care of in an airport that serves half a million passengers every single year," Profita said.

The airport is self-sustaining, meaning it generates enough revenue on its own to maintain its operations, said Louis Hubbard II, chief operating officer of the airport. The airport did not receive any funds from the city-parish when it was under governmental control, he said.



STAFF PHOTO BY JAVIER GALLEGOS

Mike Edwards, BTR director of aviation, shakes hands with Metro Council member Aaron Moak as council member Cleve Dunn Jr. looks on during the BTR Airport governance transition ceremony at Baton Rouge Regional Airport on Tuesday.

"An airport is more than a place where people catch flights," Hubbard said. "It's an important economic engine, a gateway to our region, and a critical connection between Baton Rouge and the rest of the world."

The airport remains a subdivision of the state government, Edwards said, still subject to state procurement, ethics and transparency. Most of the changes will happen behind the scenes: staff, tenants and partner airlines are staying put.

Mike Edwards' title was previously director of aviation. The change to a CEO title is part of the airport's organizational restructuring, which also includes Hubbard's title changing from assistant director of aviation to chief operating officer.

The new authority also comes with a name change to Baton Rouge Regional Airport, previously Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport. Edwards said the designation as a regional airport doesn't change how the airport functions but better represents the regional service it already provides. The Federal Aviation Administration issued a new airport operating certificate to the airport last week, recognizing it under its new title of Baton Rouge Regional Airport.

"We didn't pursue this because the airport was struggling," Edwards said. "We pursued this change because the airport was succeeding."

The airport is gearing up for another busy holiday season, decked out in garland and ribbons. But the small regional airport is understaffed, Edwards said, largely due to lower pay compared to other airports. Baton Rouge airport often does not have enough flight options for locals to use the local airport, causing them to drive to Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport for more options. The Baton Rouge airport has capacity for a team of 82 and currently has about 60 employees.

Edwards said the authority is conducting a compensation analysis to determine how to better recruit employees and keep top aviation talent in Louisiana.

Planning for the governance change began several years ago after airport leaders discussed how to prepare the facility for long-term success, sparking a yearlong governance review that included studying other airport models, assessing potential financial impacts and meetings in Washington, D.C., with the FAA. The Airport Commission recommended switching to an independent authority in 2024, which was followed by approvals from the Metro Council, state Legislature and Gov. Jeff Landry.

"Please keep an eye on the airport," District 4 council member Aaron Moak said. "Keep watching us. Watch us grow. Watch us continue to support what you're looking for in the public and what you want to see out of your Baton Rouge airport."

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TRIAL

Continued from page 1B

future. Painter said rumors were swirling that Wade Petite, publisher of the Pelican Post News, may have something against Painter.

Painter recalled a 2018 conversation he had with Petite, before he decided to run for president. Painter claims Petite told him that if he ran, he would try to sabotage him the way he did former parish President Kenny Matassa.

"Mr. Petite said, 'If you run, we will F you like we did Kenny Matassa,'" Painter testified.

Matassa was indicted in March 2017 on an election bribery charge, accused of offering political favors to get a candidate to withdraw from a Gonzales City Council race. Petite posted audio recordings of what he says is the bribery attempt. Matassa was ultimately acquitted.

In pretrial hearings, Clouatre's attorney argued that the Pelican Post article did not use the word "cover-up" or claim Painter was a part of one, and it simply raised a question for voters about what Painter had done with his years of knowledge about the alleged incidents.

Petite testified in pretrial proceedings that he received the recording from Clouatre and published it because he believed it was newsworthy. Petite at the time was working for Clint Cointment's campaign, who was running against Painter in the race for parish president.

The lawsuit has gone through several rounds of court proceedings in the past few years, with some issues reaching the state Supreme Court.

Painter originally also named Cointment, District Attorney Ricky Babin and Clouatre's employer, Hughes Insurance, as defendants. The courts have dropped all of them from the case.

Painter claimed Babin was collaborating with Cointment. In 2021, a judge dismissed Painter's claims against Babin.

And in 2024, a judge dropped Cointment and Hughes Insurance, ordering Painter to pay their court fees. The court found that Painter could not prove Cointment "conspired to defame" him, and Hughes Insurance was not "vicariously liable" for its employee's actions.

LAWSUIT

Continued from page 1B

directive. The state Supreme Court has held that public notice is a requirement for the PSC to change its rules. The directive appeared on a December 2025 LPSC meeting agenda with the notice "Directive on commission's Lightning Initiative."

"That short agenda item did not tell the public anything meaningful, because at the time there was no such thing as the commission's 'lightning initiative,'" attorneys for the plaintiffs wrote in the lawsuit. Most & Associates, a New Orleans-based firm, is representing the plaintiffs.

Attorney William Most is also representing plaintiffs in another recent lawsuit that alleges open meetings law violations in advancing incentive deals for SpaceX.

The PSC declined to comment, citing pending litigation, but a lawyer for the PSC told Most in a letter last month that the lightning directive was "not a rule change," and was instead a "directive" that used the proper procedure.

"The Lightning Directive provides a regulatory pathway for the certification of new generation under an expedited process," PSC executive counsel Kathryn Bowman wrote in response to a letter from Most, who asked the commission to withdraw its lightning directive. "The utility still bears the burden of proof throughout the proceeding that the generation is in the public interest and is at the lowest reasonable costs."

Opposition to Meta's data center has come from the right and the left, with some conservative landowners in north Louisiana railing against plans to expropriate property to build the huge transmission lines needed to power Hyperion.

"Our coalition members are facing forced expropriation, permanent loss of value, and damage to their family farms, private homesteads, and wildlife habitats under a process cooked up behind closed doors," Dustin McAnn, head of the Louisiana Landowners Coalition, said in a statement. "The Public Service Commission owes Louisiana landowners transparency and constitutional fairness, not secret shortcuts that benefit a multi-billion dollar utility at the expense of everyday Louisianians."

Along with Meta, Applied Digital is also using the fast-track process for another data center in Boyce.

Coussan, the PSC member who authored the rule change, said the commission will likely discuss the lawsuit in private at its next meeting, which is customary among public bodies.

"Public engagement with the Public Service Commission is at an all-time high and I believe that is a good thing for the people of Louisiana," Coussan said.

Commissioner Davante Lewis, a Democrat who was the only member to oppose the lightning directive, said he still believes the directive should be rescinded.

"I warned from the beginning that this directive raised serious concerns and could face legal challenges," Lewis said in a statement. "I opposed it then, and I oppose it now."

The suit comes about a week after midterm elections in which voters around the country rebuked data centers; of more than 40 data center restrictions on the ballot across the nation, all but one was approved by voters. Candidates around the country made opposition to data centers a key part of their campaigns.

Gov. Jeff Landry has remained steadfast in his support of data centers, which he has sought to rebrand as "digital factories." On Sunday, Landry again rejected opposition to data centers, telling Fox News host Peter Doocey that he supports data centers, saying they will bring jobs to Louisiana.

Doocey cited a Fox News poll that found 76% of Americans would oppose having a data center built in their community.

"You didn't run that poll in Richland Parish and you didn't poll the teachers in Richland Parish, who went from the lowest paid teachers in Louisiana to the highest paid teachers in Louisiana," Landry replied. "You look at a parish that had extreme poverty and right now it's got record amounts of opportunity."

The lawsuit against the PSC could scramble Entergy and Meta's plans to get an unprecedented amount of new power plants and transmission lines approved by the end of the year. Entergy and opponents have litigated the plans for the expansion — involving seven new gas-fired power plants — before an administrative law judge. The PSC is expected to vote by December.

The commission has two newly elected members, Republicans Stephanie Hilferty and John Atkins. They will take office in January, moving the PSC from a 3-2 Republican majority to a 4-1 split.

BLOTTER

Continued from page 1B

Using surveillance footage, LSU police identified two suspects who were wandering around the Oxbow Hall bike racks on Oct. 17 and using bolt cutters to steal scooters. The suspects then rode the two scooters back to their silver Honda sedan before driving off.

On Oct. 22, officers were investigating a vehicle matching the description of the suspects' vehicle in the South Hall parking lot when they saw 31-year-old Jamal Clark and 27-year-old Daniel Williams walking and arrested them.

Clark was arrested on a count of theft, a count of carrying a firearm on campus and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. He was booked into the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison.

Williams was arrested on a count of theft, illegal carrying of burglary tools and possession of a firearm on campus. He was released on bail Oct. 30.

LOTTERY

MONDAY, NOV. 9, 2026
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PICK 4: 6-2-0-3
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