

Economic Development Assessment of Kentwood, Louisiana

(July 2002)

Cost of this assessment was partially underwritten by Entergy Louisiana as a service to and in support of the citizens' development efforts on behalf of Kentwood. The objective is to provide information, considerations, and alternatives to help citizens evaluate and improve their community.

Prepared by:
J. W. (Jack) Vincent II
Performance Development Plus, LLC
(504) 885-2004
E-mail: jvincent@communityfacts.com

Foreword

Assessment Objective: This assessment was conducted by Performance Development Plus, LLC between March and July 2002. It consisted of several town visitations, interviews with citizen and government leaders, and an opinion survey of citizens that resulted in 34 questionnaire responses being returned (Appendix A), and a review of reference and written material about the town. Every effort was made to collect accurate and timely information about Kentwood.

The purpose of this assessment is to provide an overview of Kentwood's economic development resources and potential so that the citizens can determine if, and how, they want future development to occur. With regard to industrial and business development, Kentwood's citizens must determine what type best matches their desires and that compliments their community. It is not the consultants' intent "to tell citizens what they should do." Our aim is to provide information and possibilities for citizens to consider in planning Kentwood's future. Some *Possibilities* are listed for consideration in a section at the end of the assessment report.

Politics -- This being an election year, it would be a shame to have comments in this document or its contents used as a negative political tool. Certainly there are problems in Kentwood as there are in all communities, but the current conditions are the result of many factors, and any blame must be shared by all. Leaders and citizens alike can use this assessment to concentrate their energies on the positive, and to identify what can be done to address its problems and improve Kentwood. It is hoped that rather than seeking blame or running against people and things that candidates will run for something positive.

Impact of Technology: Some people believe that the existence of the American "small-town" is threatened. However, there are probably more opportunities for economic development in small towns than ever before. This is especially true because the very nature of business operations is changing, and the aging population means that there will be many more retirees. Personal computers and telecommunication technology are making it possible for entrepreneurs and businesses to operate out of homes, small store-front buildings, and rural industrial parks.

For some business types, location is not as important as it once was. Delivery services, such as Federal Express, UPS, and Roadway Package Systems, make it possible for small, high-value, specialized items to be shipped anywhere in the world within a matter of days. For example, a small manufacturer of jeweled, egg-shaped purses works out of an old barn in rural Louisiana. Those purses, that cost hundreds of dollars or more, are shipped around the world.

Business operators have more options to them than ever before. The City Florist and gift shop in Yale, Oklahoma also rents tuxedos. The shop owner does not have an inventory of clothing. Instead, he takes measurements and orders from a rental warehouse. The tuxedo is shipped to the customer and returned to the wholesaler by

UPS. Near Lexington, Oklahoma, an architectural firm serves clients from around the world out of a renovated farm complex. And remember, Gateway Computers began their Internet and mail order business in South Dakota, far from the major east and west coast markets.

It is also possible to work for a major company, and yet, “not go to the office.” Employees’ offices are becoming “virtual offices” comprised of cellular phones, fax machines, copiers, and laptop computers that move with an individual. Entrepreneurs are, therefore, able to make business location decisions without negatively impacting “quality of life decisions.”

Small towns located near larger cities are particularly well situated as are those on major Interstate highways. Citizens can access the cultural resources and amenities of the larger cities and still retain the positive aspects of a small town lifestyle. It is now possible for small towns to “think big in a small way.” However citizens in small towns must unite, prepare, promote, and sustain their communities. It is hoped that this assessment may lead to the uniting of Kentwood’s citizens and the formation of a comprehensive Community Development Plan.

Local Organization and Commitment: A town is only as strong as the commitment of its citizens and the political will of its elected leaders to make a positive impact. A community’s success level and future is determined more by local leadership, and citizen commitment and participation than by physical resources, governmental assistance, or external expertise. To benefit from new technologies and the opportunities that they bring, communities must become organized and focused in their development efforts.

As Community Development consultants, we believe that citizen input and involvement is important. Citizen input should be sought and encouraged. That is why we have spent many weeks visiting Kentwood, attending focus group meetings, and asking citizens to complete a survey. Different governmental, civic, and business groups are encouraged to unite and collaborate on planning and creating Kentwood’s future.

In reality, the leadership work in most organizations may be done by a few elected officials and civic leaders who step forward to manage targeted projects. However, the process should always be open, and leaders should always actively communicate with and recruit citizens who are willing to help.

Background on Kentwood

The major influx of settlers to the area began after 1830. Most of the original settlers to the Kentwood region were from Great Britain comprised of English, Scottish, and Irish immigrants, followed later by a substantial migration of German and African Americans. African American’s comprise a majority percentage of Kentwood’s current population.

The economy of the area was originally built on timber and agriculture, specifically farming and dairy. While the dairy industry has declined in recent years, it and the timber industry still play a vital role in the area's economy.

Of growing importance is the region's deep water aquifer with its abundant supply of high quality fresh water. "The National Climatic Data Center said that as of the end of July, 49 percent of the 48 contiguous states were affected by moderate to extreme drought. (Fox News 8/15/02)" There are even fresh water shortages reported throughout the South and in some Louisiana communities such as Ruston.

Physical Infrastructure

Highways/Streets: The highways, roads, and city streets in Kentwood are in relatively good condition and seem to be regularly maintained. Approximately five years ago, Kentwood resurfaced all its streets. The estimated life of the blacktop is twenty years, so the Town's streets currently have an expected life of fifteen years before major resurfacing has to be performed.

The major highways, I-55 and US Highway 51 are heavily traveled, apparently with commuting and commercial traffic between Jackson, Mississippi and Hammond, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans. Louisiana Highway 38 is an east-west artery that goes through the center of town connecting it to Mt. Herman and Easleyville.

Airports: Kentwood is fortunate in that it is located near a number of large airports. A significant commercial aviation facility is available in Hammond Louisiana (36 miles), Louis Armstrong International Airport in Kenner (77 Miles) and Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport is 90 miles away. There is also a general aviation facility, John E Lewis Field Airport, in McComb MS, just 22 miles away.

Railroads: The Illinois Central Gulf/Canadian Railway passes though the eastern part of the town, generally paralleling US Highway 51. There is a small siding and commercial property adjacent to the tracks that could support an industry requiring rail transportation.

Environmental Problems: A cursory review of the town did not reveal any other former industries or properties that might pose a significant environmental hazard. However, there is a former city landfill located adjacent to the Tangipahoa River, just to the east of town. It was apparently properly closed and does not appear to present any environmental threat. The property may have some redevelopment use as a recreational facility, and would likely qualify for federal "brownfields" assistance to make this happen.

Weather and Physical Geography: Kentwood's geographic setting is a significant part of its attraction and beauty. It is located in the rolling hill country of the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, just north of Lake Ponchartrain and New Orleans. It has a

unique geography for the southern part of Louisiana, a geographic feature know as the Southern Pine Hills of the East Gulf Coastal Plain, comprised of oak-hickory- pine forests, and located at levels significantly above sea level. The area was originally part of Spanish Florida, but later obtained by the United States to become part of Louisiana.

Shown below in a table are the weather statistics reported at nearby McComb in Pike County, Mississippi from 1971 to 2000, where the following average readings were recorded:

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	YEAR
Average High	59.2	63.6	71.0	77.2	83.8	89.9	91.8	91.7	87.2	78.8	69.0	61.7	77.1
Average Low	38.3	41.1	47.4	53.3	61.7	67.9	70.9	70.3	65.8	54.6	46.2	40.5	54.8
Monthly Precipitation	6.72	5.53	6.59	5.78	5.40	4.86	5.51	5.19	4.68	3.40	5.06	5.80	64.52
Heating Degree Days	518	360	206	74	7	0	0	0	1	68	253	445	1932
Cooling Degree Days	14	6	26	80	247	417	507	496	346	121	31	14	2305

Source: National Weather Service

Rating Considerations

Location, transportation infrastructure, physical environment and geography are some of Kentwood’s greatest development assets. Highway and road travel to and in the Town are very efficient and the infrastructure is in good repair. Kentwood’s location on Interstate 55 just north of Hammond, Louisiana and South of Jackson, Mississippi is a major benefit. Further, the presence of a major rail line provides another transportation asset that may have application to businesses seeking a location with rail. Individuals can live in Kentwood and commute to work or to the recreational and cultural amenities of New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Jackson.

Though somewhat distant from south Louisiana’s two major airports in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, it is close enough to each as to not be too inconvenient, but to offer options with regard to air fares and airline selections.

The Town’s attractive rural setting and abundant supply of water provide additional physical attractions for prospective residents and businesses.

Social Infrastructure

“Local Spirit”: Kentwood has not participated in the growth that has been experienced by Tangipahoa Parish and the other parishes of the Florida parishes or by nearby Pike County Mississippi just to its north. There is a great deal of frustration present among residents about the lack of progress and growth. Many blame their leaders, but it appears that collectively, they have also done little to unite and bring about positive change.

Distrust between the two primary racial groups, African American and White, in is an additional burden borne by Kentwood that saps its potential for development. Many of the citizens responding to the development survey mentioned this as a problem. Citizens from each group view the other as primarily motivated to “look out for their own”. The “big picture” of improving things for all seems to be lost. Kentwood will be unable to progress until it develops and focuses on a progressive agenda built on a “community-wide vision”.

The lack of unity and shared pride can also be seen in the general condition of the town. Many home owners and businesses do not maintain their buildings or surrounding property. Equipment, trucks, and inventory are very visible on major streets and highways, detracting from the potential curb appeal of the Town.

Housing:

Kentwood has a stock of many attractive older and historic southern homes. Many appear to predate 1900, and are in excellent condition. The available lots and the lots of existing homes are often large, wooded, and attractively landscaped. Some of the larger homes also have the potential for conversion into bed and breakfast's in support of the Town's tourism initiatives.



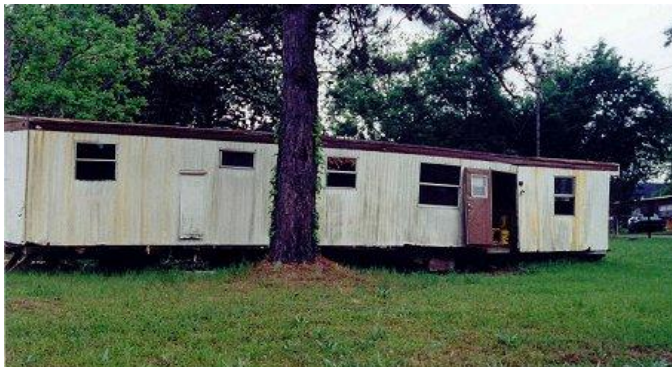
However, Kentwood is a town of contrasts. The Town faces a significant housing problem. It appears that a much as 1/3 of the homes, vacant and inhabited, are either uninhabitable or require major renovations. These homes and buildings are scattered throughout the town and not just confined to low income areas. This further detracts from the Kentwood's curb appeal, hurting its opportunities to develop its tourism and retirement development sectors.

The quality of housing is closely related to a community's wealth. A significant percentage of the town's population lives at or below the poverty level. About thirty percent (30.5%) of Kentwood's families have incomes of less than \$15,000 compared to about twenty percent (19.5 %) for Tangipahoa Parish. It would seem that a great many of Kentwood's poorer families apparently live in substandard housing.

As of 2000, there were 979 housing units in Kentwood. Of those, 13.2% were vacant compared with 10.4% for Tangipahoa Parish. The higher vacancy rate can partially be attributed to the condition of many vacant structures. These blighted homes and businesses are a detriment to recruiting new residents, retirees, and subdivision developers. Many individuals would likely be unwilling to locate in a neighborhood or town that appeared to be in decline, thinking that their investment would be negatively impacted by nearby properties and decrease in value.

Further, there is a shortage of quality homes and rental property, which indicates a development opportunity. For example, owners of nearby Inspiration Park and campground have several "cabins" on their property. While originally built for campground visitors, we understand that these are currently being rented by full-time residents who could not find suitable rental property in or close to Kentwood.

As a likely by-product of low income, twenty-three percent (23.1 %), nearly one quarter of all structures were mobile homes. Kentwood's mobile home percentage is significantly high for a municipality, and can pose a long-term threat to the tax base and property values. It also appears that many of these mobile homes are older and in bad repair. By comparison, mobile homes comprise just 14.5% of the homes in Amite, a community to which many locals compare themselves.



While "manufactured homes" are a low cost alternative for housing, they generally do not hold their appearance and value over time when compared to permanent structures. Further, when they are spread throughout a town, rather than sited in "trailer parks", they discourage investment in homes of permanent construction. The presence of a large number of

trailers in a municipality can also erode the desire to maintain existing permanent structures when their presence is viewed as part of a general decline in home values.

Listed below are some tables comparing information about Kentwood with Tangipahoa Parish and other communities.

2002 HHS Poverty Guidelines

Size of Family Unit	48 Contiguous States and D.C.	Alaska	Hawaii
1	\$ 8,860	\$11,080	\$10,200
2	11,940	14,930	13,740
3	15,020	18,780	17,280
4	18,100	22,630	20,820
5	21,180	26,480	24,360
6	24,260	30,330	27,900
7	27,340	34,180	31,440
8	30,420	38,030	34,980
For each additional person, add	3,080	3,850	3,540

SOURCE: *Federal Register*, Vol. 67, No. 31, February 14, 2002, pp. 6931-6933.

Total Housing Units In Kentwood

1 Unit Detached	711
1 Unit Attached	9
2 to 4 Units	18
5 to 9 Units	9
10 or More Units	24
Mobile Homes	228

Vacant Housing In Kentwood

Total Vacant	129
Seasonal Vacancies	18
Homeowner Vacancy Rate	4.5
Renter Vacancy Rate	5.8

Value of Owner Occupied Housing In Kentwood Compared To Parish

	Kentwood	Parish
Less than \$50,000	42.6%	18.4%
\$50,000 to \$99,999	33.6%	43.6%
\$100,000 to \$149,000	14.1%	20.4%
\$150,000 or higher	9.7%	17.6%
Median Cost	\$ 57,800	\$ 85,400

Rental Costs In Kentwood Compared To Parish

	Kentwood	Parish
Less than \$200 Mon.	14.3%	6.9%
\$200-\$299 Mon.	16.0%	9.7%
\$300-499	34.8%	40.7%
\$500 +	15.1%	42.6%
Median	\$ 352	\$ 427

Religious/Service Organizations: Kentwood seems to have a very large and active religious community. When asked about community strengths, several citizens commented that they and their neighbors were “religious and God Fearing” people. There are numerous churches with large and active congregations. Many of the churches sponsor fellowship and other activities for members. Church groups can be an asset for positive change if organized and focused on a common agenda and shared community vision.

Education: Kentwood High School is not only well-maintained and attractive, but provides the Town with a source of pride through its sports program and many famous graduates. One citizen stated that in the stadium on game nights, it is the one time when all citizens are united.

Some hold the perception that the local schools are not performing well. Shown below is a chart comparing the performance of local schools on the School Accountability Index, a State performance measure. These provide an overview of each schools performance. The higher the index score, the better the performance. The full School Report Card for Parents for 1999-2002 on each school can be found in the appendices (Appendix E).

Weaknesses – Only two of the five area schools, Spring Creek Elementary met or exceeded faculty qualifications for Masters Degrees when compared to the Tangipahoa School District and State. Further, only two of the five, Kentwood Elementary and Spring Creek Elementary, met the District’s attendance and dropout rates, and two of the five schools, Kentwood Elementary and Chesbrough, were ranked as academically below average.

Strengths – Three of the five schools, Kentwood High School, Kentwood Elementary, and Spring Creek Elementary, met the Leap Index and raised scores in 2000. All five met the Iowa Index and raised their performance in 2000. Three of the five schools, Jewel M. Sumner High School, Chesbrough Elementary and Spring Creek Elementary, ranked as academically above average.

School	Leap 21		Iowa Index		Attendance Index		Dropout Index		SPS (Composite Score)	
	'99	'00	'99	'00	'99	'00	'99	'00	'99	'00
High Schools										
Jewel M. Sumner High School	69.5	72.5	75.6	86.4	68.3	78.3	200.0	200.0	77.8	83.3
Kentwood High School	32.3	82.6	54.2	70.9	36.6	120.0	117.5	200.0	43.4	86.9
Elementary Schools										
Chesbrough Elementary	73.5	57.1	51.9	61.7	106.6	88.3	NA	NA	70.4	61.6
Kentwood Elementary	45.1	64.2	31.4	48.7	103.3	98.3	NA	NA	46.8	62.9
Spring Creek Elementary	84.7	92.7	85.4	90.2	113.3	93.3	NA	NA	87.7	92.0

Overall, all area schools seem to making progress under the State's initiatives to improve elementary and secondary education. Class sizes at Kentwood High School, Chesbrough Elementary and Kentwood Elementary are somewhat smaller than those in the Tangipahoa School District and State, possibly providing students an opportunity for greater individualized attention similar to that found in private schools.

Police/Fire/Emergency Medical Services: Kentwood has a full-time police force and a volunteer fire department. The fire department also operates an emergency medical services response unit. The town is served by a contract ambulance service that is managed by Tangipahoa Parish.

Police Department – The Kentwood Police Department is manned by the Chief, seven regular and one part-time officers. The authorized strength is for eight full-time officers, and the Department is currently seeking to fill the other full-time position.

The police department's equipment includes four marked and one unmarked cruiser. All handguns belong to the department and are relatively new, 40 caliber automatics.

The starting level pay for officers is \$16,120.00. For an officer with a family of three (spouse and one child), this is very close to the poverty level. Apparently because of the low pay, most officers hold one or two other jobs to help support their families. The relatively low pay rate also makes it difficult to attract new officers.

Fire Department – The Kentwood Fire Department is a volunteer department supported by five full-time, paid employees. Forty-two volunteers serve on with the department. Regular department meetings are the 1st and 3rd Mondays of each month at which time the members receive regular fire fighting training. Further, the members also receive classes through Louisiana State University.

Estimated response times for calls is between 6 and 10 minutes depending whether or not the calls are in or outside the towns limits. It was further estimated that there were about twenty-five to thirty structures fires in a year. Most of these were small incidents resulting from negligence and the poor condition of local housing. During winter, for example, many fires result from the improper use of heaters.

With its current equipment and staff the department does an admirable job and has mutual aid agreements with several nearby communities. The Town's fire rating, "5", is on a par with other towns its size. The rating may be further lowered by the purchase of new equipment. Inspections of hydrants are made every six months, training is within or exceeds requirements. The department's equipment consists of a service truck, a Class "A" pumper, a mini-pumper used primarily for grass fires, and a service truck. The department also has a SCBA cascading recharging system. Discussions with fire personnel resulted in the identification of the need to purchase another Class "A" pumper dedicated as a first responder to in-town fires as part of a process of improving the Town's fire rating and providing better service.

Emergency Services -- The Town's fire department has Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT's) that back up the contract ambulance service that provides coverage Parish-wide. They provide first response to any medical emergencies until ambulance support arrives.

Some residents expressed concern, however, over the response times for ambulance service. The linear shape of the Parish and distribution of units sometimes results in delays for service to Kentwood. In those instances, the Fire Department's EMT's respond.

Healthcare: The closest hospitals are available in McComb, Mississippi, Amite, and Hammond. These are relatively close and provide more extensive emergency and clinic services than are available locally. However, some concern was expressed over the state of healthcare in Kentwood. One doctor has served the community well for many years. He is nearing retirement and many of citizens worry about the Town's ability to attract a replacement. Adding to the concern is the difficulty faced by most rural towns in the United States in attracting younger doctors and their families.

Culture, Parks, and Recreation: Several citizens put a movie theater and organized youth recreation on their wish list. It was mentioned that there is little in town for young people to do and that the nearest movie theaters are in Hammond and McComb. Unfortunately the location of commercial movie theaters is driven by an area's market size (population). The chance of locating such a facility in Kentwood is small given its areas demographics and the decline in its population.

Kentwood does have city parks and athletic fields, but it does not have an ongoing, organized sports program for youth. The town provided funds to purchase some athletic equipment to begin a modest baseball program. The equipment was provided as "seed money" to allow volunteer coaches and parents to build a baseball program.

Apparently the program was not advertised or promoted and the town-owned equipment is not in the town's possession and available for future use.

A group of citizens in a more affluent neighborhood have taken it upon themselves to fund and outfit youth athletic teams. This is a positive model of volunteerism, parental and citizen involvement that might be used for future recreational projects.

Rating Considerations

Kentwood, as described by numerous residents, has a curb-appeal problem. The Town is not as attractive as it could be due to the condition of many homes and businesses. Further, a large percentage of the homes and buildings in Kentwood are substandard and uninhabitable. Major renovations or demolition would be required to address the structural problems.

Housing is one of the most pressing problems that must be addressed in Kentwood. It is obvious that new permanent construction homes, both single and multiple family dwellings, are needed to provide housing for Kentwood's existing population and for future growth. Resources and developers of low-cost, quality homes, alternatives to mobile homes (trailers and manufactured homes), need to be found and encouraged. Further, many of the Town's uninhabited, vacant structures need to be abated and either repaired or torn down. Appendix C provides an overview of housing and commercial buildings in Town.

Many white residents in the area view the Kentwood Schools as "black schools". Residents living outside the Town often send their children to nearby predominately white schools. This societal phenomenon makes it difficult to recruit upper income white and black students and residents to town since the quality and diversity of schools are a primary "pull" for most affluent young marrieds with children.

Economic Development Infrastructure

Sewage: Superficially, the town's sewage system appears to adequately provide its current population and has capacity for business expansion. It was designed capacity for a population of 3,300 (1992). The system process 680,000 gallons of wastewater per day and is currently operating at about 2/3 of capacity. However, the system poses a future expenditure problem for the town.

A significant portion of the town's home sewage lines were installed in the 1930's, and are comprised of four foot sections of terracotta pipe. That means there is a potential leak location at four foot intervals throughout the system. As the system ages, there will likely be a larger number of broken pipes that will repair repairs. Further, storm water intrusion through pipe breaks can overload the treatment system and exceed the

lbs per day loading permitted by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency. This may eventually result in Kentwood being fined for non-compliance if the system is not maintained and upgraded.

Town Construction/Maintenance Equipment: The town owns two trenchers, a dump truck, backhoe, two utility trailers, two large and one small pick-up trucks. For grass cutting, Kentwood owns and operates two tractors with bush hogs. Though most of the equipment has further service life, the two 1970's vintage tractors used for grass cutting were reported to be undependable. Maintenance on them may soon begin to cost more than the cost of purchasing and operating new equipment.

Water: An abundant supply of fresh water is one of the Town's biggest, and perhaps, one of its most underutilized, if not squandered, assets. Most of the water in the town is not metered and water rates seem extremely low compared with the reality of water services in most communities. Both residential and small commercial users pay just \$20 per month regardless of consumption. Large water users are metered but their rates are also very low.

The Town's wells and pumps can produce 1,000,000 gallons of water daily and Kentwood has two water towers with storage capacity totaling 325,000 gallons. This surplus capacity means that the town can increase its population or commercial water consumption without any additional capital expenditures.

It was reported that Kentwood's water consumption far exceeds that of similar sized towns. That would tend to be indicative of waste and mismanagement on the part of citizens.

Natural Gas: Kentwood operates its own natural gas distribution system serving approximately 600 customers. Most of those customers are in town, but gas mains run outside the Town's limits south along US Hwy. 51, serving about 45-50 customers to just north of Roseland, north on Hwy 51 and west on LA Hwy. 38.

Electricity: Local electric service is provided by Entergy Louisiana.

Solid Waste: Solid waste is collected by a city contractor and transported to sites in St. Helena Parish and Amite for burial at sanitary landfills. A ½ cent sales tax helps subsidize the cost of solid waste collection which costs Kentwood about \$162,000 per year. The contract with the current service provider will be expiring soon and bidding the service out with other disposal services is an option that might result in lower costs.

Telecommunications: Local telephone service is provided by Bell South and cable service is provided by Galaxy Cable.

Industrial Park: Kentwood does not have a municipal "industrial park" as does Ponchatoula, Bogalusa, and Springhill. At one time it owned an industrial building that has since been sold. Therefore, the Town's recruitment of business tends to be more

passive and less competitive, relying primarily on property owners and realtors to actively market the city as a business location. Locations off US Hwy 38 west of the Interstate would be prime locations for small to medium sized businesses and a planned public industrial park.

The Town currently has funds from the sale of the former industrial development building (the former garment factory) that might be used to purchase a new building or commercial land. Further, Kentwood also owns forty acres of land just south of Town. While that property is probably not be appropriate for an industrial park or a spec building, it might be sold to generate money for job creation and revenue enhancement projects, or swapped for land that is more appropriate for business development activities.

Employers: Most of the town's employment is in the retail service industries and government. Kentwood Spring Water, Kentwood Manor Nursing Home, the Tangipahoa School System are among the Town's major employers.

Main Street Retail Buildings: The Town's historic "main street" is in serious decline. Of the approximately 20 buildings on "main street" only about six were occupied at the beginning of this assessment. Two of those were public facilities, the library and senior citizen center. Several citizens expressed concern over the Town's leadership, believing that "they may have waited too late to act" in order to save the existing buildings. In fact, several buildings were identified for demolition during the process of this assessment.

After an initial review, a preliminary recommendation was recommended by this consultant that the town explore the creation of Enterprise Zones and Economic Zones that would provide tax incentives for redevelopment of the blighted areas. Since then, enabling legislation was passed by the Town Council. Already, several pieces of property have been purchased and redevelopment is underway.

The Mayor and a number of other citizens also suggested that a new Town Hall be built on "main street". The current facility is overcrowded and could be easily converted for use by the Police Department and Fire Departments who could use the additional space. It was thought that relocating the City Hall, with its high level of foot traffic" to "main street", would make properties there more attractive for retail establishments, provide support to existing businesses, and further encourage redevelopment.

An initiative is now underway to identify a site on "main street" and to purchase it for redevelopment as a new Town Hall. This consultant believes that these are two positive steps toward the redevelopment of the once proud and historic "main street".

Rating Considerations

One of the citizens commented that the Town has a "flat growth" mentality. There is money just to provide for existing services and maintenance and little has been done to

promote additional development. If the town is to attract new residents and businesses, it needs to be more aggressive and to invest in itself. Kentwood already has a small, healthy business base on which to build additional growth. Its utilities appear to be competitively priced and water and sewerage services currently offer capacity for additional growth.

A major plus for small business development is the fact that Internet is available in Town without long distance toll charges. Home-based and store front businesses can successfully locate in Kentwood and benefit from an Internet presence that broadens their market size and increases sales potential. Further, professionals from major corporations can have a "virtual office" in a Kentwood residence and use their home as the center of sales and customer service territories.

Some tracts of land in and near Town might be available for business development, but are not actively marketed by their owners. Further, the lack of a planned industrial park, private or public, means that any company seeking a location in Kentwood must do substantial research with realtors and property owners. Therefore, Kentwood is not a high target location for consideration except for the conscientious and thorough site selection specialist or developer.

Human Infrastructure

Population: Kentwood experienced a decline in population between 1990 and 2000. This is not a positive sign, especially since most of the Florida Parishes and southern Tangipahoa experienced increases in population. While many of the new residents to Tangipahoa elected to live in unincorporated areas with large properties, other nearby communities experienced positive spillover even though their populations may have declined.

See Appendix B for a complete report on the 2002 census of Town of Kentwood and Tangipahoa Parish. Between 1990 and 2000, Tangipahoa's Parish increased 17.4% compared with 5.9% for Louisiana. Unfortunately, Kentwood's population declined by 10.7% to 2,205 from its 1990 level of 2,468.

In Tangipahoa Parish, whites comprised 63.9% of the population and African Americans comprised 28.4%. In Kentwood, African Americans represent 64.9 %, a majority of the population. Almost thirty percent of the families in Kentwood live in poverty (29.5%) compared to eighteen percent (18.0%) for Tangipahoa Parish.

Population Increase/Decrease By Selected Tangipahoa Communities

Kentwood	-10.7
Albany	34.1
Amite	-3.0
Hammond	11.1
Independence	5.6
Natalbany	34.9
Ponchatoula	-4.5
Roseland	6.3
Springfield	-10.0
Tangipahoa	31.3
Tickfaw	9.2

Labor: A significant percentage of Kentwood's population **is not in the labor force** (53.4% compared to the Parish at 41.3%). This is likely due to a high percentage Kentwood's population being school-aged children, poorly educated single mothers, and retirees. Businesses opening in Kentwood would likely have to employ skilled workers from outside the community. However, Kentwood is fortunate, it that it does have a large regional pool of labor from which to draw. The Tangipahoa Parish civilian labor force is 44, 631, 15,752 for Pike County Mississippi, 5,472 for Amite County Mississippi, 4,128 For St. Helena Parish, and 16,348 for Washington Parish.

In a discussion with a local business manager, it was learned that many of the higher skilled jobs he filled were filled by employees from outside the community. In his opinion, while many of the local citizens were high school graduates, they lacked the technical training or advanced education beyond high school that could make them promotable to higher level positions. He found it necessary to seek technical and supervisory candidates outside of Kentwood. In Kentwood, only 28.4 5 of the population above 25 years of age had any education beyond high school compared to 37.3 % for Tangipahoa Parish.

Rating Considerations

The current recession has led to a lower pace of business expansion in the last two years and more caution on the part of businesses. Through his business contacts, this consultant has learned of increases in business activity, specifically commercial metal building construction, that may be a signal of the beginnings of an economic turn around.

Kentwood's labor force gets high marks for productivity and work ethic. Several employers spoke positively about the abundance and work ethic of unskilled local workers. There was, however, a reported shortage of skilled workers locally. One business operator explained, for example, that he could find numerous people to fill his

lower level openings, but often had to employ people from outside the community to fill his higher level jobs.

Employment for some of the lower skilled citizens in Kentwood may be threatened by relocation of those jobs to countries with significantly lower labor costs (in the 35 cent per hour range). As an example, the cut and sew jobs that were once prevalent in the rural south have just about disappeared. Further, an undereducated adult population, a large percentage of the population not in the work force, and a high percentage of school age children in the population result in a lack of labor support for business and industry.

New recruitment targets for the town might include higher skilled, higher paying jobs, but that will mean increasing the skill levels of current residents to give them employment opportunities. In addition to offering residents job advancement, increasing the level of work force skills may result in greater competitiveness in attracting new, high-tech businesses.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Listed below in Table 1 are the consultant's objective and subjective ratings of Kentwood's strengths and weaknesses for economic development. These ratings are similar to the ratings it might receive from a site selection specialist considering the town for development. The ratings are not the product of an exact science. They are based on the consultant's experience, site observations, and comments from those interviewed during the site visit.

Further, these are general ratings. Every business has its own weighted factors that are considered when looking for sites. Thus, a "Poor" rating in this assessment may be irrelevant to a particular company. Their location decision may be primarily driven by five or six of the twenty-four listed factors. However, a town's development potential is significantly robust and diverse when most factors are rated as "Good" or "Average". Kentwood may not have the ability to change some factors, such as climate, but initiatives could be implemented to strengthen lower ratings that are under the Town's control, especially those that raise "key factors" for the business types that are sought. What is encouraging is that most of the factors that are rated as poor and average can be improved by the citizens themselves.

Table 1 **Subjective Rating of Location Factors for Kentwood**
 Possible Ratings - Good (2) Average (1) Poor (0)

Location Factors	Ratings	Point Value
<i>Physical Infrastructure</i>		
Transportation System For Moving Goods	Good	2
Transportation Network For Business Travel	Average	1
Weather & Geography	Good	2
<i>Social Infrastructure</i>		
Broad-Based "Can-Do" Spirit	Poor	0
Low Cost Of Living For Rural Areas	Poor	0
Availability Of Quality Health Care	Average	1
Safety Of Investment (police, fire, emergency services)	Average	1
Quality Of School System	Average	1
Parks And Recreational Opportunities	Average	1
Housing Availability	Poor	0
Quality College/University Nearby	Good	2
<i>Economic Development Infrastructure</i>		
Quality of Public Utilities (Electricity and Gas)	Good	2
Availability of Water And Waste Systems	Good	2
Telecommunications Interconnections	Good	2
Available Commercial Buildings	Poor	0
Lack Of Governmental "Red Tape"	Average	1
Tax Rates On Business	Good	2
First Rate Scientific Community In Area	Good	2
Availability Of Fully Developed, Publicly-Owned Sites	Poor	0
<i>Human Infrastructure</i>		
Desire For Development	Good	2
Relatively Low Wage/Salary Rates	Good	2
Labor Availability	Average	1
Quality Of Work Force	Average	1
Labor Climate	Good	2
<i>Overall Rating</i>	Average	1.25

Overall Rating Scale: 0-.69 = Poor .7-1.39 = Average 1.4 or higher = Good

SWOT Analysis

Listed below are some of the real and perceived Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats facing Kentwood in the opinion of citizens as outlined in the citizen survey, Appendix A, and by the consultant.

Strengths:

- Available Land and Rural Area For Expansion
- New Businesses Near The Interstate
- Transportation Infrastructure
- Abundant Supply of Fresh Water
- Low Cost Of Property Compared With Nearby, Larger Communities
- Many Famous Natives
- Attractive Rural Setting
- Large Municipal Lots With Many Large Trees
- Church Activities High For Most Denominations

Weaknesses:

- Distrust Between The Races
- Declining Population
- Deteriorating Homes and Commercial Buildings (Poor Curb Appeal)
- Poverty Impacting A High Percentage Of Population
- Depressed "Main Street"
- Few Skilled Jobs Among Employers
- Aging Population
- Waste Water Disposal System (Sewage) Aging
- Schools Split Along Racial Lines
- Few organized and leisure activities for young people

Opportunities:

- Nearby Grocery Distribution Centers (Hammond and Jackson)
- Demand For Housing in Region
- Retirees Looking For Low Cost Rural Areas and Louisiana Has Major Retiree Initiative Underway
- Security Concerns In Major Population Centers
- Town Likely Qualifies For Many Grants and Low Percentage Economic Development Loans

Threats:

- Reduction In Capital and Other Development Funding From the State and Federal Government
- Economic Recovery Is Slow Reducing Opportunities For Business Expansion
- Increased Competition From Private Schools Using Vouchers Could Contribute To Less Support For And A Decline In Public Schools.

Possibilities

Planning: Kentwood and Tangipahoa Parish have great potential for growth because of their geographic location and assets. The next part of this project will involve the creation of a Kentwood strategic development plan. Such a plan might include goals dealing with: Education; Tourism/Recreation; Retirement Development; Business and Main Street Development; Business Recruitment; Marketing; and Community Leadership Development. A Performance Development Plus, LLC consultant will help Town and area leaders and citizens organize a planning committee to begin the planning process which will include a series of public meetings to present a report of the assessment and begin the collection of ideas to address critical issues.

Community Development Task Force: A common mistake occurs when, citizens expect elected or appointed officials to do everything required for successful development. Still other citizens expect that someone or a governmental agency from outside the community will “save” it. As mentioned above, the consultant believes that for a community to prosper and thrive, local residents and businesses must be committed to and involved in planning, implementing, and managing change.

Prior to beginning any organized development effort, it would be advisable to form a planning committee (e.g., Community Development Task Force). This committee should involve elected officials, representatives from all interested civic, business, religious and service groups, major property owners, and any “citizens”, regardless of residency, who wish to make a positive contribution to the Town’s future. These committed individuals would form the basis for a coalition for making improvements and comprehensively managing the Town’s future.

The focus of the committee should be on action outside meetings rather than on meetings themselves. The intent should be to actively encourage, support, and implement activities and initiatives that help the town build on its strengths and that address its weaknesses. While the task force’s first activity would be to create a comprehensive development plan for the City, another will be to support and coordinate the actions of “objective teams” charged with accomplishing different components of the plan (e.g., business recruitment, tourism development, “main street” redevelopment, expansion of recreational activities, etc.).

This coordinated effort would help strengthen each participating organization and current initiative in Town. It will also be easier to recruit volunteers and to attract citizen support if the organizations have clear, coordinated objectives with completion dates and measurable outcomes. Citizens are also more likely to “buy into” an initiative when the benefits to Kentwood and to them are obvious. Each partnering organization should seek new members to help on their portion of the comprehensive plan.

This organized development effort will provide Kentwood with a united voice at the Louisiana Legislature and Tangipahoa Parish Council meetings and with federal

officials, and increase its possibilities of obtaining help and resources. Further, what it lacks in formal representation on the Parish Council and at the State legislature, Kentwood can compensate for in unity and organization.

Comprehensive Development Plan: The next most common mistake made by communities is seeking a “silver bullet”. Leaders look for the one industry, the one activity, the one thing that will “save the town”. Over the years, many cities have learned the hard lesson resulting from a lack of economic diversity and failing to address threats to, or weaknesses in its economic base as soon as they are identified. When the “major industry” closes in a city, it often has drastic results for other businesses and residents. Successful development occurs when a comprehensive approach is used.

Kentwood fortunately has a diversified economy. However, additional development of its existing retail and service sectors, the recruitment of new businesses such as food and beverage processing, and development of under developed sectors such as tourism and recreation could produce additional sales tax revenues, additional jobs for residents, new businesses, and new residents.

Community Building (Team Building): Kentwood should foster an inclusive, strategic planning process that will also serve as a “community team building” process. Joint visioning meetings of elected officials, heads of service organizations, major business heads, and major property owners could result in the creation of: a shared “Vision” of the future; the identification of development goals and objectives; and the creation of a coordinated master development plan for Kentwood. Some organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Kentwood Community Development, may step forward to assist the town in its marketing and business attraction efforts, and to lead specific initiatives in the plan.

Race Relations – Numerous individuals made comments in the survey and in public outreach meetings during the assessment process that race relations were poor. The tension that lies immediately below the surface is obvious. Fortunately, many individuals did speak openly and honestly about the problem in public meetings. Much of the problem seem to revolve around a lack of trust between the races, a problem built on the lack of experience in working together to solve community problems.

One individual specifically stated that the Council members were unable to work as a team because votes and actions often broke down along racial lines. If this is the case, then in this consultant’s opinion, community leadership and citizens need to adjust their thinking away from the past and toward a shared future. Until Kentwood is able to create a shared vision of the future and have its citizens’ support it with aggressive initiatives, programs, and projects, individuals will continue to fight over limited resources instead of building a stronger economy with more resources for all.

Rather than being primarily a racial problem, it is likely that what is being expressed is a trust problem resulting from a lack of experience in working together. One very good way to begin to overcome this distrust is to begin working together on shared problems through an ongoing process. As groups focus on solving common problems, they will develop better working relationships and higher levels of trust. The soon to be initiated community planning process and objectives emanating from that activity will hopefully support this aim.

Town Finances: This consultant performed a very cursory review of the Town's finances in discussions with local contacts. Kentwood currently receives about \$529,000 in tax revenues. When video poker was legal in the Parish, it produced an additional \$250,000. The loss of gaming revenue and the defeat of a recent millage election for fire service improvements (10 mills) by just 37 votes was a severe financial blow to Kentwood. The loss of these funds has resulted in money not being available for community and economic development projects, above the maintenance of the current budget. Further, the Town may face a financial crisis in the not too distant future.

As is the case in many small towns, population is in decline or stagnant and revenues are generally flat. However, the cost of operations and maintenance is increasing. Kentwood has been the fortunate recipient of a number of grants that helped maintain and expand some of its infrastructure. But with regard to locally generated income, it may be "eating its seed corn resulting in lean future harvests."

Kentwood receives collects a 2% sales tax, $\frac{1}{4}$ of which ($1/2\text{¢}$) is used to supplement the Town's solid waste disposal. This keeps garbage collection fees artificially low which is politically popular; however, it limits the use of a significant portion of the sales taxes to one governmental function. Further, surpluses from utility operations are currently supplementing the general fund budget. While current obligations are being met, the result of this short-range contingency spending is that little remains to be invested in the Town's replacement equipment, future development, quality of life that would stimulate business and population growth and dramatically increase its revenues.

In order to grow and maintain its current level of services, Kentwood's revenues will eventually have to be increased. Recent expansion of business along the Interstate will likely provide some additional sales tax revenue, but additional money may be needed to address all the citizen's expectations such as an organized recreational program, the attraction of new businesses and residents, and improved senior citizen activities (e.g., exercise equipment). Additionally, Kentwood's sewage lines are aging and the Town may find itself facing serious fines in the future for non-compliance with Federal EPA standards.

While revenues are stretched to the limit, Kentwood seems to heavily subsidize such services as water, garbage, and the town cemetery. Water is provided at very low flat rates for most citizens and businesses. Large water users usually produce significant wastewater for the sewage system that adds to operational costs.

The town cemetery is an example of an undervalued public asset. However, it is recognized that a citizen committee is currently studying the cemetery's operation and will be making recommendations to the Mayor and Council. A burial plot in the Kentwood Cemetery costs just \$ 100, a tremendous bargain in today's commercial funeral industry environment. In most metropolitan areas, burial plots often cost several thousands of dollars. With its current low rates for plots and low burial fees, it is likely that a large percentage of future burials in the Town cemetery will involve non-residents, and that trend is likely to increase as the cost of burial plots escalates in other localities. In essence, the Town would be subsidizing the burials of non-citizens.

Providing quality services at fair market value is laudable, whereas providing services at below market rates deprives the Town of valuable resources for other activities. By charging fees more consistent with market realities, the Town can recover expenses, and improve and expand current services, and add additional ones. This will require "political will" on the part of the Kentwood's elected officials, and as mentioned above, viewed as a necessary increase where the benefits of the increases are clear to all.

In this consultants opinion, Kentwood should have an objective financial professional take a very detailed look at its financial structure, and provide recommendations on how best to use limited resources to provide the highest quality of services at a fair price, and expand other services related to developing its economy and quality of life.

City Fees and Fines -- Another revenue stream that needs to be examined is city fees and fines. Several individuals reported that permit fees are very low and have been at their current level for many years. It was further reported that often fines are waived or reduced for residents or that some refuse to pay because there are not provisions to incarcerate municipal code and ordinance violators. Small increases in fees and aggressive collections can help cover the Town's administrative expenses and free up money for other uses such as support of the Fire and Police Departments.

Impact On Low Income Families – Through thoughtful planning, utility rates could be increased with little to no impact on low income families or small businesses. For example, a basic monthly level of water could be established (e.g., 10,000 gallons) and the rate for that amount of water could be provided at the current level. Above that level, a step rate system could be created for water consumption to help cover the cost of operations and to improve the water and sewage system. Similarly, the price of cemetery plots could be increased immediately, but offered to current citizens at the old price for a certain period of time (e.g. twelve months), after which it would be increased to reflect market values.

Annexation: Several residents suggested that Kentwood consider annexation of adjacent land along LA Hwy 38, US Hwy 51 north and south, and along La Hwy 1053. In many instances, some of Kentwood's utility services (gas, and water) already extend beyond the Town's boundaries, improving its position for annexation and resulting in little financial outlay. Acquiring additional land now, before development occurs, would

position the Town to capitalize on the future growth. It is likely that most of the new development in the Kentwood area, particularly commercial development, will occur just outside the town boundaries, especially west of the Interstate. This land, as well as land to the south and north of town, offers the town an opportunity to develop and grow. For example a retirement community developer would likely prefer a large tract of undeveloped land rather than building within the existing boundaries of town, which would possibly require the purchase of property from several owners and the demolition of existing buildings. The same applies for an "industrial park" or large commercial entity.

This consultant checked with a municipal engineering firm and found that upon annexation in Louisiana, a town is required to extend its municipal services to the newly annexed area. However, if funding was not available, it could apply for assistance from State and federal agencies, and still be in compliance with the requirement until the services can be extended. As an example, there are areas of Kentwood that are not yet on the municipal sewage system.

Business Development: This consultant must mention the positive decision on the part of the local Ford Dealership to rebuild after a recent fire. It would have been very easy for the owner/dealer to take an insurance settlement, close down and relocate to another community. The dealer chose to rebuild and the dealership is now an attractive business leading into the heart of Kentwood. This positive event is a signal that there is strength in the local and regional market on which future growth can be built.

The Town is well situated to take advantage of the grocery distribution centers in the Hammond and Jackson, Mississippi areas. Its abundant water supply positions Kentwood particularly well for specialty beverage manufacturers, breweries, and food processors. However, many types of food processors may put increased demand on an aging municipal sewage system that could result in overloading.

Many citizens expressed a desire for various retail establishments such as an additional fast food, chain restaurant, a full-service clothing store, a dry goods store and a chain hotel/motel. Unfortunately, most retail establishments select locations based on the population base to sustain them. Since the Kentwood's population has declined, it places the Town in a poor position to attract new business, unless the nearby population has increased or if Kentwood can capitalize on its Interstate location.

A representative of the Chamber mentioned that they frequently get calls from individuals who want to visit Kentwood and ask about a place to stay. Unfortunately, there are none and visitors are often referred to McComb or Amite. A hotel or motel does appear to be a viable development target for the Town and would support Kentwood's current tourism and retiree initiatives.

Identifying and actively marketing the Town's business development assets will be essential in order for the Kentwood to be competitive, and for it to "appear on the radar screens" of businesses seeking locations. Someone or an organization needs to take

the lead in working with State and the Tangipahoa Economic Development Foundation and their representatives in actively recruiting business. In many small towns and Parishes, a group will contract with government to be their business development organization (e.g., East Baton Rouge Parish and the East Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce). In Kentwood, this might be the Chamber of Commerce, serving as a contractor for the Town.

Satellite Training Facility and Work Force Development – Having a high-tech training facility in the community would provide Kentwood's citizens and the surrounding population with a convenient location for upgrading their work related skills. Two buildings are available just to the east of I-55 on La Hwy 38. One is a former clinic and the other a former retail establishment. One of these might make an excellent satellite training and educational facility for a State Vo-Tech School or Southeastern Louisiana University. It is recommended that the nearest trade school and SLU be contacted to inquire about their interest in establishing a possibly shared, satellite facility. This would provide a work force training facility that can support existing and help attract new business.

Industrial Park: Many small towns find that industrial parks provide a way of increasing business growth, new jobs, and revenues (Bogalusa and Ponchatoula). The Federal Economic Development Agency and other governmental agencies also have grants and low interest money available for the creation of industrial parks for towns such as Kentwood. Entergy also provides community matching grants of up to 15,000 for infrastructure purchases and development.

Purchasing land and creating a public industrial park would give Kentwood a major asset for attracting new business and industry. Such a park could be carefully planned so as to attract the small to medium sized businesses that would find Kentwood an excellent location. Further, a public industrial park would give the city a location over which it has control and to which it can actively recruit the type businesses and industries it desires, those that can potentially employ large numbers of citizens.

Publicly owned parks with carefully crafted covenants, leases, and legal protections can be a major asset to a town. For example, rather than sell property to a company that might go bankrupt and prevent rapid redevelopment, the land could be leased and would immediately revert back to the town in the event of a bankruptcy. Further, lease fees could be used not only to pay debt service, but also to improve park services and infrastructure to make it an even more attractive location for other businesses.

Land Use: The Town also needs to look at its current land use. What tracts are open for development? How are they zoned? Is zoning enforced? What would residents like to see in different locations? How can that desired development be encouraged?

Well thought out land use and zoning can help protect existing property values and encourage new, high quality development. Before making business and home location decisions, investors want uncertainty about the future minimized and as much

protection for their investment as possible. Conscientious land use and zoning minimize investors' risks.

The Town needs to inventory its development assets, identifying what property is available for development and its current zoning. For example, A large tract of land is available on Martin Luther King Blvd. near a Town park and tennis court area. This might be a good location for multi-family residential development, or an assisted living retirement facility, supporting the attraction of retiree spouses who wish to be near their loved ones requiring assisted living services.

I-55 Interchange Sites -- Several large tracts near the Interstate are currently used by auto parts/salvage businesses that do necessarily require the benefits of their prime locations. These seem to violate the "highest and best use" land use principle. In fact, their appearance, so visible to the casual traveler on I-55, detracts from the community. A long range initiative could be implemented to locate these existing businesses to areas of town that are more appropriate, and to encourage best and highest use of the land near the Interstate for development into restaurants, motels and hotels that could support tourism. This would require delicate and tactful discussions with property owners and business operators. If a major hotel/motel chain were to purchase the land near the Interstate, the purchase price would likely more than pay for the purchase of more suitable properties and relocation of the existing businesses.

Zoning Abatement: Zoning enforcement and abatement play a vital important part in planned, quality development, and in protecting the value of the Town's property. Many times in desperation, towns freely allow violations, variations and exceptions to zoning, especially when they are economically depressed. Essentially, they are willing to "bend the rules" to get any development, or to retain current residents and businesses. This, however, compounds the efforts to attract new and desirable development.

Kentwood needs to be vigilant and guard against expedient actions that lower its long-term competitiveness and property values. As mentioned above, individual investors in of homes and businesses seek locations that protect their investments. Poorly maintained structures, structures that are inconsistent with nearby buildings and homes, lower the value of all properties. To allow trailers in a neighborhood of permanent construction homes, for example, can have a significant negative impact on existing property values, and have a chilling effect on the development of new permanent home construction. This will force residential prospects to seek locations in communities and subdivisions with restricted covenants. Appendix F is an example of a creative approach to abatement that Kentwood might find useful.

Manufactured Homes: A controversial issue for many small towns is manufactured housing. The housing demographics included earlier in this assessment provide some concerns for this consultant. Today's manufactured homes bear little resemblance to the "trailer homes" of the past, and they are a low-cost alternative to permanent construction homes. Many low income families and young marrieds seek them for starter homes. If property sited, skirted, and maintained, they pose few problems,

especially when they are a small percentage of the total housing stock, and located in trailer parks.

As manufactured housing increases as a percentage of the total housing stock, it can also have a negative impact on a community's competitiveness and tax revenues. For example, one North Carolina county's manufactured homes exceeded 40% of the total homes. The influx of many young families with children that accompanied the growth in manufactured housing placed a tremendous burden on the school system. The county school system and government had difficulty funding the needed growth and maintenance in the school system because of the significant drop in the average assessment values of the county's homes. Another negative spillover was that the county quickly got a reputation as an unsightly location with a poor educational system and low quality of life. Most of the upper and middle income population growth in the region was occurring outside of the county, even though it was closer to a nearby metropolitan area.

It has been this consultant's observation that sometimes unscrupulous individuals will convert their properties into "trailer parks", and purchase and rent a large number of mobile homes. Mobile homes provide a high return on the investment to landlords, especially when they are not maintained. Landlords who rent manufactured housing receive significant depreciation benefits from mobile homes which encourage a "slum lord" mentality. It encourages landlords to treat manufactured homes as disposable homes. When operated in this manner, the mobile homes will quickly become substandard properties that are nuisances, eye sores, and abatement problems.

Manufactured housing's construction, long-term durability, and value are not the same as permanent housing. The impact of a severe storm can demonstrate that. When possible, permanent construction should be encouraged and sought, and manufactured housing carefully regulated so as not to have a negative impact on overall property values and curb appeal. This means strict adherence to zoning and regulations, and rapid, aggressive abatement should they not be maintained.

Housing: As previously mentioned, Kentwood faces a significant, but not impossible housing problem. It is recommended that Kentwood establish an active working relationship with Keith Bobsempel of the newly formed North Lake Community Development agency. There are numerous options and strategies available for funding permanent, high quality, low-income housing. Mr. Bobsempel can also be a source of information about low-interest loan and incentive programs for investing in depressed properties.

He can likely provide information about HUD loans and grants and such innovative programs as reverse mortgages that can provide elderly home owners with an income stream for living expenses and housing restoration. Loan assistance for is likely available to citizens for renovations on existing and new home construction.

Use of Federal HUD loans can be an effective method of stabilizing homes that are threatened with or that are in decline. HUD 203K loans, for example, can be obtained for renovation by qualified low-income borrowers. Up to \$5,000 can be borrowed for as long as thirty years at current low interest rates. These loans can help individuals on low or fixed incomes renovate their homes and prevent further loss of permanent construction houses in Kentwood. The Northlake Community Development Agency may also be able to provide information on senior citizen "retirement communities" and housing. He may also be able to provide information and assistance for implementing a Habitat For Humanity project.

Residential Recruitment -- Those working to develop a comprehensive plan should also consider a residential recruitment initiative. This could be done in conjunction with annexation of rural property that might eventually include residential developments. Several of Kentwood's other attributes also make it a good candidate for residential development. These include:

- ◆ Low cost of property
- ◆ Low property taxes
- ◆ Large, historic homes that could become real "show pieces"
- ◆ Quiet and safe rural environment
- ◆ Proximity to the Interstate for commuting
- ◆ Available greenfield properties and vacant buildings
- ◆ Central location between Jackson Mississippi and New Orleans that may be of interest to middle income retirees who want to stretch their retirement dollars by moving to a rural location
- ◆ Toll-free Internet access and cable access

Unfortunately, many young couples or single parents with children may not view Kentwood as a desirable residential location due to the negative perception of the public school system. However, this would not be a factor for attracting retirees. Therefore, if a residential recruitment program were implemented, part of it might focus on older retired or empty nest adults until the perception of the Kentwood schools can be changed.

Downtown Development: Kentwood's "main street" has been in serious decline. The majority of the buildings are vacant and in serious disrepair. Several have already been torn down, and as of this writing, several others are slated for demolition. As previously mentioned, the Town has passed enabling legislation so that its "main street" property and business owners can qualify for restoration tax incentives. This is a positive move that should be viewed as only part of a comprehensive redevelopment effort.

Kentwood may consider starting a Main Street Program. Other towns such as Hammond, Amite, and Ponchatoula have been successful with their "main street" type redevelopment programs. Marguerite Walter, listed in Appendix D, can provide some support and information about this alternative.

On another positive note, a local businessman has recently purchased a couple of buildings with restoration in mind, and a very attractive western clothing store with a large inventory is also operating on the “main street”. Additional support needs to be found to encourage further businesses development and to assist the current businesses operators in being successful.

As previously discussed in this report and at public meetings, an initiative is underway to relocate the City Hall to “main street”. City Hall has a very high volume of foot traffic. Relocating it to the main street would have a very positive effect for property values and business attraction. “Main Street” would no longer be “off the beaten path”. Relocating City Hall would have an effect similar to a shopping mall attracting a major chain store as an anchor store. As people visit the Town Hall, they also see and can use the services and buy the goods of the street’s retailers.

Community Beautification: Immediate improvements could be made in Kentwood’s “curb appeal” if a clean-up fix up campaign were organized. Such a campaign could include encouraging and assisting residents and business owners to paint and do minor repairs, keep their properties landscaped and their grass cut, and to install attractive signage. Help could be sought from local churches, school, and community organizations to provide labor for the effort, and the Town could arrange for the current garbage contractor to provide special dumpsters for the effort.

As part of this initiative and the Town’s marketing initiative, a theme and logo could be developed that would be an integral part of all that is done. One of Kentwood’s assets is its banking sector. Under the Community Reinvestment provisions of federal regulations governing their operation they are required to invest money in the development of their communities. A bank in one Oklahoma town, for example, initiated a 4-4-4 loan program as part of its Community Reinvestment activities. Money was loaned to local “main street” businesses specifically to help stabilize deteriorating buildings and to improve the appearance of the town. The loan program included, a list of approved expenditures (e.g., painting, plumbing, roofing, and façade improvements). An awning design was adopted by the Main Street Program with a color scheme that supported the town’s overall marketing theme (dark green with white business lettering). “Main Street” businesses could borrow up to \$4,000 at four percent interest for four years for items on the list of approved expenditures. A similar plan might be employed in Kentwood, with banks pooling their resources to manage a program in which all have a shared risk.

Business Incubation: There are many reasons for business failures including poor management, poor service, insufficient market size, lack of competitiveness with discount chains, and an inappropriate business type for the market. Some “up-front” guidance might improve the chances for success for new businesses starting in Kentwood.

Rather than relying solely on recruiting outside firms, Kentwood’s citizens should consider incubating their own businesses with assistance from allies such as

Southeastern Louisiana University's Small Business Development Center, The Chamber, a Main Street program, or other business organizations. An incubation program might be established in one of the older store fronts on "main street" as part of that initiatives overall objectives. Property owners might be willing to offer low rental rates to an incubator in the hopes of locating the established businesses in other portions of their properties.

A single new business on "main street" may not be able to generate sufficient consumer traffic by itself. However, if several businesses were encouraged to launch themselves simultaneously in the same building, then their chances of succeeding are higher. St. James Parish, for example, operates a business incubator in Vacherie on the west bank of the Parish. Several small businesses operate from a former medical clinic in which they are set up as if they were in a small business mall. Tenants include a chiropractor, a flower/gift shop, a formal rental wear store, and a small restaurant/snack shop. This arrangement lowers the fixed costs of rent and utilities for all participating small businesses during their crucial start-up phase. Shared operation might also promote longer operating hours by allowing operators who "cover" each others businesses during longer operating hours.

Another action of a "Main Street" coordinator could be to contact owners of existing buildings and to encourage "no rent leases" on vacant properties. In lieu of rent for a period of time (5-10 years), lessees would be required to make renovations or repairs to the buildings that they occupy. Expected renovations would have to be carefully spelled out. For example, roof repairs might specify the weight of felt paper and roofing material as is done in public bids. These "no rent leases" could be a "win-win" relationship that would have several positive effects including:

- ◆ Stabilization of marginal businesses and buildings
- ◆ Improved appearance that attracts shoppers
- ◆ Increased value of the owners' property
- ◆ Encouraging owners to find an active use for their property
- ◆ Removal of an "eye sore" buildings
- ◆ Increased economic activity in town
- ◆ Retention of historic and viable buildings that might otherwise be vacant and deteriorating

Tourism Development: For a small town, Kentwood has a significantly high number of famous former residents. Kentwood is already making an organized effort to promote its relationship with Britney Spears. The results of this can be seen in the total number of visitors to the Town's website. Additional benefits may be gained from promoting its relationship to other famous former residents such as Michael Jackson.

Several tourist related destinations are also near by such as Inspiration Park and Camp Moore. These should also be promoted as part of the "Kentwood Package" as they currently are on the Town's website. This package needs further development and

promotion through allies. Stronger relations with Lt. Governor Blanco's tourism office, for example, would help Kentwood promote itself.

Water Park – Water is often mentioned as a strength and an identifier of Kentwood. A “water park” might be a tourism development target. It could be located near the Interstate which would make it very visible and help attract guests. The Blue Bayou water park on I-10 south of Baton Rouge is an example of such a park. It started small and has since expanded to include Dixie Landing Amusement park.

Expanded Sporting Events, Fairs and Festivals: Fairs and festivals can play an important part in a community's overall quality of life and tourist initiatives. One need only look at nearby Ponchatoula and the Strawberry Festival. It is understood by this consultant that most civic and service organizations make their entire annual operating budgets during the festival. Further, it results in a significant sales event for all retail establishments and a positive impact on sales tax revenues for the town.

Kentwood has several community fairs and festivals (e.g., Dairy Festival, Christmas Parade) on which to build. These are often time consuming for organizers, but could be the basis for larger festivals that might attract residents and tourists. A review of the current fairs and festivals, and how they play an expanded and coordinated role in Tourism Development is in order.

“Community Marketing Team”: One of the Development Task Force's goal teams could be a “community marketing team”. This team would be responsible for developing a logo and “brand identity, identifying potential development targets (business and residential), developing marketing themes, creating marketing material, and conducting targeted marketing campaigns. The work done to date by Kentwood Community Development Committee (KCDC) is laudable and relates well to an aggressive campaign now underway by the State in the Lt. Governor Blanco's Office and The Louisiana Retirement Commission. The first regional pilot of the State's initiative is in the East Florida Parishes that includes Tangipahoa Parish.

KCDC has plans, for example, to do obtain a targeted mailing list and to conduct a targeted marketing campaign to subgroup of retiree prospects. KCDC's activities, if further supported by the Town, could position the Kentwood for residential growth by capitalizing on State funding and advertising early in their campaign of long-term and sustained attraction of retirees.

Building & Site Inventory: In order to market Kentwood, the marketing team will have to know what is available. The Community Development Task Force should consider creating and maintaining an inventory of available buildings, and commercial/industrial lots to support their marketing initiatives. The Town's utility bills and Entergy's electric meter records may provide information about vacant properties and their owners. Realtors may also be interested in including their listed properties. This data base would include: a description of the property (size, number of stories, etc.); the owner's

name, phone number, and address; condition (good, fair or poor); year built; last renovation; rent, sale or lease; asking price (firm or negotiable); and other information.

Entergy Corporation maintains an electronic site and building data base, InSite. This is available over the Internet to those seeking locations in Louisiana. The Community Marketing Team should identify Entergy's criteria for including sites and buildings and include all those in the Town and nearby that qualify. This will help Kentwood obtain prospects that would not otherwise know about the Town.

What Is Targeted Marketing? -- Targeted marketing is the most effective form of marketing. Themes that are selected for Kentwood should be those that are unique or outstanding about the town. Kentwood needs to create and develop a theme that will differentiate it from other, similar sized cities in the Florida Parishes and southeast US. In discussions with citizens, it seems that a "water theme" may have high appeal and relate well to Kentwood's best known export other than Britney Spears.

Targeted marketing has distinct advantages over general marketing campaigns because it minimizes expenses, while maximizing chances for success. Targeting identifies the individuals (e.g., retirees and "empty nest" professional couples) or organizations (value added food processing for the region's agricultural products) with the highest probabilities of interest in Kentwood. Specific messages can be developed and contact made with each targeted group to help promote the Town.

Citizens themselves (individuals and business owners) are often the best source of ideas. They could be surveyed and asked what goods or services they travel outside of town to purchase. This might help identify viable business types that might successfully operate in town.

The Louisiana Department of Economic Development and The Louisiana Retirement Development Commission may also be able to provide specific information on targeted industries and retirement strategies. Further, Southeastern Louisiana University's Small business Development Center is also charged with enhancing the Region's economic development and may provide assistance to Kentwood in addition to assistance to small businesses there.

In addition to working with the State Department of Economic Development, the Community Development Task Force should explore more active working relationships with the Tangipahoa Economic Development Foundation and Entergy. These groups can also provide support for helping develop Kentwood. For example, The State and utility companies are the primary points of contact for business prospects seeking Louisiana locations.

Local realtors, particularly those who list commercial properties and large tracts of land can be additional development allies. If they know the Town's development targets, they can be alert to opportunities to refer targeted prospects to Kentwood. A strong

local development group will also build confidence in the community's ability to help them manage prospect visits and to "make sales".

MetroVision is another development organization that supports Tangipahoa Parish and receives inquiries about locations. The Town needs to let MetroVision know that it is organized, interested in bringing in new businesses, and what its development targets are. Appendix D is a listing of development professionals and organizations that may be able to assist Kentwood.

Community Marketing Material: Kentwood's Internet website contains substantial information about the community and would likely answer most initial questions from those expressing interest in the Town as a residential or business location. Kentwood also needs to be certain that its website and marketing material are linked to and available to its development allies sites and materials.

However, the Kentwood lacks a professionally developed marketing package for use in its promotions. Such material need not be expensive. It might include a tri-fold brochure, a Community Fact Sheet and other material that could be printed locally on a computer as needed.

To save money, professionally designed and printed color templates could be created onto which computer generated text and pictures could be printed. This would keep the printing and graphic costs low and prevent the printing of large amounts of material that has a limited shelf life. Material could be revised and printed as needed.

Rather than ignoring its larger neighboring communities, Kentwood should use their assets as leverage itself for development. "What we don't have in Kentwood, is just a short drive and a few minutes away." or "Small town life style and safety with bigger city convenience." Whenever possible, Kentwood's marketing should be positive and focus on its advantages, even when those advantages may be assets in nearby, larger communities.

For Kentwood and its neighbors to succeed, a cooperative and possibly regional approach would be beneficial. Printed or spoken comments about other regional towns should **never** be negative or defensive, even when responding to questions about their shortcomings. Several of the nearby small towns might be encouraged to join forces and assume a pro rata share of marketing development and campaign costs.

Immediate Business Attraction: A business marketing package could be developed for recruiting new businesses to Kentwood. This package should consist of the following:

- ◆ A cover letter from the mayor inviting the company to consider doing business in Kentwood.
- ◆ The Entergy Community profile.

- ◆ Descriptions and pictures of available sites and buildings with owner's name, address, phone number and firm sales price.
- ◆ A traffic count performed by the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development on I-55, US Hwy. 51, and La. Hwy. 38.
- ◆ A description of the Kentwood Market area. This would include population numbers for Kentwood, nearby towns and surrounding rural areas.

Capitalizing On The High Traffic Flow: Kentwood is fortunate to be located on Interstate 55 and US Highway 51. There appears to be a significant daily north/south flow on these arteries. It is recommended that the marketing team obtain information about the traffic flow from the State Department of Transportation and Development. That information could be extremely important in influencing the location decisions of chain retailers and restaurants.

Working With The Regional DODT Representative – It would also be advantageous for the Town to contact and establish a working relationship with the local LA Department of Transportation and Development representative. This individual may periodically have limited discretionary funds available for highway maintenance and capacity building. If the Town leaders were to identify and prioritize some local highway transportation needs (commercial access roads, culverts, shoulders, etc.), these could be conveyed to the representative and may get addressed as funds came available.

Conclusion: Kentwood faces some significant problems. However, most are not insurmountable. The Town has many assets on which to build for attracting new residents and businesses. The future depends on organization and cooperation among Kentwood's residents and businesses. This consultant looks forward to the next phase of this project and believes that a core group of leaders, black and white, is ready to help make a positive impact on the future of Kentwood. Their success will be determined by the coalition that they create and the quality and commitment of others they recruit.