

## Evolution of the BNOBC “Greenspace” Plan for New Orleans

These are the New Orleans Times-Picayune articles tracing the evolution of the “building permit moratorium” which was a central tenet of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOBC) “greenspace plan” which gave Black neighborhoods 120 days to prove their viability or be demolished. The Brown University report concluded that the plan to not rebuild in flooded neighborhoods would have eliminated 80% of the black population. The articles are offered to researchers as evidence of how the media supported and rationalized the BNOBC plan that they were reporting on under the pretense of “balanced journalism.”

Nov. 19, 2005: release of the ULI report in print, but no graphic of map in paper  
Dec. 27, 2005: Times Picayune (TP) editorial supporting moratorium and demolitions

January 4, 2006: “Common Good” endorses greenspace plan

January 8, 2006: Plan is “good enough” for Common Good but raises controversy

January 11, 2006: Greenspace map released

January 12, 2006: Nagin expresses reservations about moratorium

January 13, 2006: Story on demand for building permits

January 14, 2006: LRA backs BNOBC Plan, Nagin has doubts

January 14, 2006: Council Bucks BNOBC Plan and BGR leads push for quick elections

January 15, 2006: James Gill commentary favoring BNOBC plan to “shrink footprint”

January 15, 2006: Story on flood maps--suggests that the BNOBC plan is only alternative

January 15, 2006: Editorial calling BNOBC “a responsible plan”—the Times-Picayune position even today

January 15, 2006: Citizens demand right to return

January 16, 2006: Chocolate city speech (transcript from January 17 article)

January 22, 2006: Nagin publicly rejects moratorium

March 21, 2006: Nagin officially rejects plan

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Rebuilding should begin on high ground, group says ; Begin with high ground, group says  
Planners warn against haphazard development  
Times-Picayune

November 19, 2005

Martha Carr Staff writer

In the most comprehensive recovery plan proposed to date, a panel of more than 50 specialists in urban and post-disaster planning said New Orleans should concentrate its rebuilding efforts on the sections of the city that occupy the high ground, while securing lower-lying areas for potential long-term rebirth.

Tackling what is certain to be the most controversial aspect of any rebuilding plan, the contingent from the Urban Land Institute said Friday that the city should use its original footprint, as well as lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina, as a guide in determining what areas are most logical for redevelopment.

Firing off a collection of bold ideas, the group also proposed creating a public development corporation that would buy and sell property to speed the city's redevelopment; establishing an oversight board with broad powers over the city's

finances; and engineering a secondary flood-control network inside the city that would use natural ridges, levees, water reservoirs, and green space to stop widespread flooding.

The panelists, many of whom helped rebuild cities like New York after the Sept. 11 attacks and Los Angeles after the Northridge earthquake in 1994, said it's not practical to redevelop every acre of New Orleans in the short term, considering that 300,000 residents and 160,000 jobs have been lost. It's also not socially equitable to allow residents back into neighborhoods that do not have adequate levee protection and may be toxic.

"These areas are going to take more data gathering and more time," said Joseph Brown, president of EDAW, a San Francisco-based architecture and environment consulting company. "Some collective action may be needed here."

The group went so far as to draft a color-coded map of the city showing three "investment zones" the city may want to follow. The first zone included the high parts of the city, like Uptown and the French Quarter, which panelists say is ready for rehabilitation immediately. The second zone highlighted the mid-ground, which the panel suggested is also ready for individual rehabilitation, with some opportunities to put together parcels of land for green space or redevelopment.

The last zone, which included some of the city's hardest hit neighborhoods, needs additional study, but could have the potential for mass buyouts and future green space, the panel said. Those areas include most of eastern New Orleans east and Gentilly; the northern part of Lakeview; and parts of the Lower 9th Ward, Broadmoor, Mid-City and Hollygrove.

In those neighborhoods, the panel emphasized that all homeowners should be compensated for their property at pre-Katrina values. They also stressed that if scattershot redevelopment is allowed in the worst-hit areas, homeowners will begin to rehab houses on partially abandoned streets, creating shanty towns with little to no property value.

The panel's map also included green areas running along natural ridges and between neighborhoods, where members suggest creating a network of flood-protection measures, including inner-city levees and new parks, to reduce the risk of flooding and stop waters from blanketing the city.

While the proposal was immediately questioned by New Orleans City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis, who represents eastern New Orleans and the Lower 9th Ward, others attending the panel's presentation were more receptive to the idea, but questioned whether the political will exists to make it happen.

"This is going to take tremendous will on our part," said New Orleans resident Jean Nathan. "I think we are going to need help on a sustained basis."

Central Authority

The map wasn't the panel's only daring concept.

The group called for the creation of the Crescent City Rebuilding Corporation, a nonprofit development corporation that would be in charge of all funds funneled into the city for the rebuilding effort.

The corporation, to be created by the state legislature, would have the power to do land banking, buy homes and property, purchase and restructure mortgages, finance redevelopment projects, issue bonds, assist with neighborhood planning, and foster the creation of community development corporations.

While the city already has a redevelopment authority, NORA, the panelists said the agency is weak and not suitable for the monumental task of assembling land and orchestrating mass rebuilding efforts.

Panelists also said their concept differs from the Louisiana Recovery Authority currently proposed by U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, R- Baton Rouge. That agency would be totally controlled by the federal government. The Crescent City Rebuilding Corporation board, on the other hand, would have appointees named by the president, governor, mayor and City Council. Both entities may be able to work in concert if the concepts are tweaked, panelists said.

Carl Weisbrod, president of Trinity Church Real Estate, one of New York City's biggest commercial property owners, said that it only took 10 weeks after Sept. 11 for that city's leadership to band together and create the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, signaling to the federal government that everyone was on the same page. That group has served as the city's central rebuilding agency.

"We put our differences aside for a short period of time to address the immediate challenges," said Weisbrod, who served on the LMDC's board. "Because of that, we were able to get immediate federal aid."

'Part of a team'

It's likely too late for the Crescent City Rebuilding Corporation idea to be taken up in the current legislative session, which ends Tuesday. But legislators could consider the idea in January, when they are expected to convene a second special session. Weisbrod said ULI has not lobbied for the idea at the state level. Members of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission on Friday said they were hearing the proposal for the first time.

The Urban Land Institute was paired with Nagin's commission shortly after Hurricane Katrina by local developer Joe Cannizaro, who serves on the commission and is also former chairman of the Washington -based think tank.

The group has spent the past several weeks working pro-bono to advise the 17-member commission as it attempts to develop a comprehensive rebuilding strategy by year's end. All of the experts who participated on the weeklong panel, most of whom run major corporations or municipalities, such as Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy and Manhattan borough president C. Virginia Fields, volunteered their time to serve. The group has also committed to long-term assistance in New Orleans, as well as in Baton Rouge and Washington.

Their final report is due next month.

"All of us who went through this process are hooked because you all became part of our team," said ULI president Marilyn Taylor. "If you will have us, we will be with you continuing to help."

Ten members of the mayor's commission were present for the report at the Sheraton Hotel downtown. Nagin, however, was in Washington meeting with federal lawmakers.

### Financial oversight

Other recommendations of the panel included creating a temporary financial oversight board to help the city avoid bankruptcy; reforming the city's tax code; creating an internal system of levees and canals that would serve as secondary protection and enhance green space; and consolidating fragmented agencies to take a regional approach to levee protection, transit services, emergency response and economic development.

Murphy said the financial oversight board, which would be created by the Legislature and run by appointees from all levels of government, would oversee and approve the city's budget, approve major contracts, and recommend financing options for redevelopment.

In the end, it would create a layer of accountability that could alleviate the concerns of federal lawmakers that money will be misspent. The panel also recommended that the city create an inspector general and board of ethics as authorized in the City Charter.

"There are interests here who want the rules to stay as they are," he said. "It won't be pretty. You have to be willing for some conflict."

### Economic development

Murphy also said the tax structure, which was cobbled together over 200 years, must be changed to deal with the absence of tax revenue in post-Katrina reality: especially when it comes to the city's practice of under-assessing property.

"Your tax structure stinks, and you need to change it," said Pittsburgh Mayor Murphy. "We are making recommendations for tough love here."

On the economic development front, the panel recommended focusing on the city's traditional economic sectors, like tourism and shipping, but placing new emphasis on the music business and the health care and biosciences sector. Key to the city's growth is bringing back musicians, finding them work and getting them equipment. The same is true with the city's key medical researchers and institutions, they said.

As for the cityscape, the panel embraced the ideas set forth by the Louisiana Recovery and Rebuilding Conference last week, mainly the use of smart-growth principals, including advocating for levee and wetland improvements, developing local and regional transportation systems that connect neighborhoods, and building in areas that are safe and nontoxic. The panel advocated rehabilitating historic properties, building infill housing in existing neighborhoods and

increasing green space by building corridors, bike paths and parks that connect areas.

### Setting goals

Throughout their presentation, the experts emphasized the need to set short-term benchmarks for success and to break the planning into three phases: the recovery stage, which should last through Aug. 2006; the rebuilding stage, which should go from 2006 to 2010; and the growth stage, which would end in 2018, when the city celebrates its 300th anniversary.

Among the goals the panel set for the next few months is restoring electrical service to all neighborhoods by January, creating benchmarks for toxicity levels by March, rebuilding levees to pre-Katrina levels and building a protection system for pumps and water treatment facilities by June, and stabilizing port and water management facilities by August.

The group also advised urgent housing actions, including getting trailers to the area, repopulating suitable public housing, adopting a building code, asking financial institutions to extend mortgage forbearance periods, and creating centers where residents can get help rehabbing their homes.

"Your housing is now a public resource," said Tony Salazar, a developer with McCormack, Baron and Salazar in Los Angeles. "You can't think of it as private property anymore."

When the panel concluded its hour-long presentation, members of Nagin's commission said they were extremely impressed by the detail of the draft report and the panel's wealth of ideas. Although the ULI panel stopped short of advocating a merger of Nagin's commission and Gov. Blanco's Louisiana Recovery Authority, it did stress that city and state leaders must craft a single vision - and move more quickly in their rebuilding efforts.

"I appreciate your bluntness," said commission co-chair Barbara Major. "You have challenged us to make more difficult and controversial choices. As my aunt used to say, 'God can put a ram in a bush.' There has to be some behavioral changes across the board. I think we just have to kick a little butt and do what we have to do."

Before the panel submits a final report, it will hold town-hall meetings in Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas and Memphis. For more information, go to [www.uli.org](http://www.uli.org).

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December 27, 2005 Tuesday

People need answers

SECTION: METRO - EDITORIAL; Pg. 4

Nearly four months after Hurricane Katrina struck, thousands of homeowners in greater New Orleans are still waiting.

Waiting for their insurance checks. Waiting to see whether they can buy new flood coverage. Waiting to find out whether their neighbors are returning, or whether anyone who rebuilds will be living alone amid block after block of blight. Waiting to see when the promised improvements in flood protection actually materialize.

This state of limbo is especially excruciating for people in New Orleans' lowest-lying neighborhoods -- including parts of eastern New Orleans, Lakeview and the Lower 9th Ward -- because it's not yet clear whether those hard-hit areas can or should be rebuilt at all. With good reason, urban planners and members of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back commission are seriously discussing whether the city's residential footprint should shrink to fit a smaller population.

But despite all the talk, no one is giving any answers to New Orleanians who lived in badly flooded areas. Public officials are understandably hesitant to tell any flooded-out residents to relocate -- but stringing people along is patronizing and unfair.

By some projections, New Orleans will have at most 275,000 people in three years, as many returning residents settle elsewhere in the metro area. If the population of Orleans Parish is only 60 percent of what it was pre-Katrina, the city won't need as many homes as it had. And if new and returning residents spread out evenly across the city's current footprint, there will be lots of empty, decaying housing units in between.

Commission members have floated the idea of allowing redevelopment in all areas, waiting for a specified period -- three years, say, or perhaps just one -- and deciding then which areas are not recovering. At that point, residents of those areas can be bought out, and condemned neighborhoods can be converted to parks, open floodplains or some other use.

In theory, this plan would allow the private market to indicate which neighborhoods are worth rebuilding. Yet homeowners become "unwitting speculators," as the Bureau of Governmental Research put it last week. The prospect of investing time and money in homes that might later be bulldozed can only discourage redevelopment. Then again, public officials who won't commit to closing down low-lying neighborhoods now aren't likely to do so a year or more down the road.

The easy political answer is that no area should be abandoned and that all neighborhoods should be rebuilt equally and at once. And the New Orleans City Council urged that very course in a recent resolution that passed 6-0, with Councilman Jay Batt absent.

But approving such a resolution is an irresponsible act, unless the council also has specific, realistic ideas about how to rehabilitate flooded-out neighborhoods in which a large percentage of homes have been abandoned. Council members presume

that rebuilding flooded-out neighborhoods is the only way to do right by residents, but fair compensation could lure people to higher ground.

In its plan for post-Katrina New Orleans, the Urban Land Institute has urged a moratorium on redevelopment of some areas. But if the city isn't willing to rule some neighborhoods out categorically, it could specify that some areas will definitely rebuild. It can set boundaries within which it will provide certain public services -- and extend those boundaries to take in other areas where a clear majority of residents opt to reinvest.

Places where human beings grew up, fell in love, raised their children and went about their lives should never be forsaken lightly. But people deserve to live in neighborhoods that can be defended against floodwaters. No matter what, New Orleans has to do something to encourage redevelopment in the safest areas -- and to give homeowners guidance about how to proceed.

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 5, 2006 Thursday

## **Support builds for rebuild plan; Official says blueprint will be 'good enough'**

**BYLINE:** By Bruce Nolan, Staff writer

**SECTION:** NATIONAL; Pg. 1

A coalition of religious and civic leaders has begun to assemble quietly behind the scenes to build public support for a nearly finished post-Katrina blueprint for New Orleans, prepared to accept its flaws on the theory that the alternative is chaos and a quick slide into urban decay.

Many members are specialists in social work, planning and other fields who have already contributed their expertise through subcommittees of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Few, however, are familiar with the blueprint as a whole.

But at the urging of Michael Cowan, head of the city's Human Relations Commission, several dozen private sector civic and religious leaders have agreed to commit to the plan -- or at least to civil discussion that avoids acrimonious deadlock when it's unveiled in a series of meetings to start Wednesday.

The alternative is to leave New Orleans' future in the hands of state officials in Baton Rouge or to real estate speculators and unchecked market forces, Cowan said at a formative meeting of almost two dozen leaders of nonprofit agencies Wednesday.

### **Better than alternative**

At the basis of their consensus, he said, is the notion that the Bring New Orleans Back plan, however flawed it may be, will be "good enough" to work with.

"The alternative to a good-enough plan for the future of our city is free-market chaos, also known . . . as every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost," said Cowan, who serves on the commission's government effectiveness and education committees. "Without a vision, the city that we love perishes. New Orleans becomes Detroit South."

Cowan, who runs Loyola University's Lindy Boggs National Center for Community Literacy; Una Anderson, executive director of the New Orleans Neighborhood Development Collaborative; and Ben Johnson of the Greater New Orleans Foundation called the group of about 20 nonprofit leaders at the downtown K&B Plaza to secure their support for the "good enough" philosophy. Anderson is also a member of the Orleans Parish School Board.

### **Planning to gather again**

The meeting included executives from the United Way, the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Urban League of Greater New Orleans, Kingsley House, the Young Leadership Council and Baptist Community Ministries, among others.

Most of the executives agreed to assemble again around Jan. 20 to be briefed on the Bring New Orleans Back plan.

But beyond that, it seemed clear Wednesday that many -- perhaps most of the 20 assembled organizations -- stood ready to recognize the plan as the only reasonable path forward, subject to public discussion and amendment that would alter it without destroying it.

Some participants noted that New Orleans historically has left much of its public agenda to be driven by elected officials, without strong leadership from the business, civic and religious communities.

"I think what we're talking about here is behavior change," Johnson said. "(Previously) we've all acted as independent agents here. The question is, can we find enough common ground sufficient to drive this thing forward?"

Gary Ostroske, executive director of United Way, said he was skeptical that the plan contained a necessary regional vision, or that it would contain many truly fresh approaches to the city's post-Katrina problems.

However, Anderson said that "the only alternative is for each of us to go back to our own (organization's) missions," which will be much harder in a deteriorating city.

### **Meetings recommended**

While the nonprofit leaders seemed to express a consensus to support the blueprint, they formally held back on committing to other recommendations Cowan laid out.

Those involve sponsoring a series of town meetings on the plan for mayoral and City Council candidates -- each dedicated to an element of the blueprint: levees, economic development, public school reform and good government. Beyond that, Cowan suggested that private sector civic leaders continue to meet quarterly with elected leaders to hold them accountable for executing the rebuilding blueprint.

Beyond those nonprofit leaders who met Wednesday, a smaller group of 10 religious leaders has had two meetings recently.



The leaders were briefed on the education component of the plan, and collectively agreed to support the larger blueprint when it emerges, on the same "good enough" philosophy.

Those clergy include the Revs. Fred Luter of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, Dabney Smith of Trinity Episcopal Church and Michael Jacques of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church. Other members include Akil Salaam, a Muslim from the Shura Council of New Orleans, and Rabbis Andrew Busch and Ed Cohn, of Touro Synagogue and Temple Sinai, respectively.

With religious and nonprofit sectors coalescing, Cowan said he and like-minded colleagues have already discussed lining up similar commitments from the city's university presidents and major business leaders. Many of those already are deeply involved in creating the plan, he said.

### **White majority**

However, the overwhelming majority of the people involved in discussion so far are white. Part of that is because much of the city's black cultural, civic and religious leadership has been scattered. But in formative conversations with the clergy group, Cowan, the primary organizer of the initiative, also acknowledged that he wanted to exclude from discussions some community leaders he felt contributed to racial polarization.

Representatives of the only two predominantly African-American nonprofit organizations at Wednesday's meeting expressed hope that they could rally behind the post-Katrina blueprint. But both made clear they need to examine it and be convinced that it treats all communities equitably.

Edith Jones, president of the Urban League, said she was acutely aware that much of the city's black leadership, largely scattered to Texas and elsewhere, was significantly underrepresented in the development of the rebuilding blueprint.

She preferred to commit to an orderly process to receive and debate the plan, rather than endorsing it wholeheartedly, she said.

In the same way, Carol Bebel, director of the Ashe Cultural Arts Center, said she was both hopeful and committed to a public debate process with the plan at its center, but was not yet ready to endorse it, again because leaders of the city's black cultural, religious and other communities could not take a full role in its development.

Moreover, the commission must confront widespread suspicion among displaced black New Orleanians that they are not welcomed back, she said.

"Right now, there is a distrust," she said. "This is not like your mom or your dad trying to take care of your best interests while you happen not to be there. Folks don't feel that way. They feel like their absence is an opportunity for (other) people to put them out. That's far from trust."

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 8, 2006 Sunday

## **Officials tiptoe around footprint issue; But buyouts, flood maps may decide matter**

**BYLINE:** By Gordon Russell, and Frank Donze, Staff writers

**SECTION:** NATIONAL; Pg. 1

"To say you're not going to fix this community or that community, you're not honoring the dead."

OLIVER THOMAS

New Orleans City Council president

From the day the notion of shrinking New Orleans' residential area to accommodate a smaller population was injected into the post-Katrina public dialogue, the idea has been radioactive.

Urban planners told Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission in November that failing to reduce the city's "footprint" was a recipe for disaster likely to produce sparse knots of struggling homesteaders living in a blighted moonscape.

But others, particularly residents of flood-ravaged areas east of the Industrial Canal, view such discussions as thinly veiled talk by mostly white power brokers aimed at keeping New Orleans' poorest residents, most of whom are African-American, from returning.

"A lot of people have this conspiracy theory -- that they (planners) don't want anybody that's not here now to come back," said City Council President Oliver Thomas, one of the 17 members of the mayor's commission.

So delicate is the topic that the mayor's commission has largely shied away from it in recent weeks, proposing far less definitive and drastic measures than the footprint-shrinking recommendation initially proposed by the nonprofit Urban Land Institute, an adviser to the commission.

Beginning Wednesday, the commission will unveil its blueprint on the hot-button land-use issue, before resuming the process the following week with presentations on subjects ranging from infrastructure to education. And while those reports will generate interest, and perhaps controversy, the question of where people will be allowed to rebuild, and under what conditions, remains Topic No. 1.

Panelists are girding for a raucous debate on the subject. As Barbara Major, one of the commission's two co-chairs, put it: "It's probably going to be a rough ride."

Given the high temperature of the footprint question, some proponents of a more compact city fear the commission may opt to sidestep it, in part or in full. If that happens, external forces may well decide the matter.

## **Flood maps due soon**

Commission members expect federal legislation soon will be adopted that will allow homeowners to sell their properties to a public authority. If so, planners will quickly get a much better handle on which neighborhoods are likely to be repopulated, and which will struggle against abandonment.

Also, a series of new federal flood maps due in the next few months may play a significant role in where rebuilding occurs. The maps, issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, could make redevelopment prohibitively expensive in certain flood-prone areas. Effectively, the market would be making homeowners' decisions for them.

In part because of that expectation, Sean Reilly, a member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, which will control the flow of much federal aid to the city, said this week that some city leaders -- in particular, members of the City Council -- aren't being straight with their constituents when they promise to rebuild the entire city.

The new flood maps will probably make certain areas extremely unattractive to build in, effectively shrinking the city's footprint, Reilly said. Insurance rates may soar in some areas, as could the cost of bringing housing into compliance with new elevation standards. He noted that the authority already has voted not to disburse any of the \$3 billion in hazard mitigation money it controls to areas considered unsafe, and he said he hopes the group will attach the same strings to an estimated \$6 billion in block grants.

"Our position begins and ends with safety," said Reilly, a Baton Rouge advertising executive, who along with other recovery authority members emphasized that the city and state panels are working closely together. "It's my belief there needs to be a healthy dose of reality down there. People need to be objective and make the best decisions they can with the best data they can."

## **Racial divisions**

It will likely surprise few New Orleanians that the footprint debate has begun to cleave along racial lines, as so many local political decisions do.

The first sign of schism came in the wake of the ULI report, which urged a phased-in rebuilding of the city. Resources should first be devoted to relatively unflooded parts of the city, the report said; a wait-and-see attitude should be taken toward others. That approach was promptly denounced by black elected officials and other leaders. Former state Rep. Sherman Copelin memorably warned officials that he and his eastern New Orleans neighbors would rebuild regardless of what any plan might recommend.

"We don't need permission to come back," Copelin said. "We are back."

The City Council then unanimously passed a resolution saying that "all neighborhoods (should) be included in the timely and simultaneous rebuilding of all New Orleans neighborhoods" and that "resources should be disbursed to all areas in a consistent and uniform fashion based on the needs of the community," a direct rebuke of the reduced-footprint plan.

The rhetoric has heated up since then. On Friday, in a remarkable council meeting devoted to declaring regional unity on behalf of better levee protection, Thomas

repeatedly went off-topic to signal a coming fight against the notion of abandoning any neighborhoods.

"To say you're not going to fix this community or that community, you're not honoring the dead," he said.

And on Saturday, former Mayor Marc Morial, now president of the National Urban League and still a potent force in local politics, jumped into the fray, giving a speech in hard-hit eastern New Orleans in which he called for "equity planning in the redevelopment of all neighborhoods" -- essentially, an argument against a reduced footprint.

From hurricane season to the May 1995 flood caused by torrential rain, New Orleans has always been vulnerable to flooding, Morial said.

"There is not one neighborhood not prone to flooding," Morial said Saturday, after delivering an hour-long address at St. Maria Goretti Catholic Church. "I don't understand the premise of a reduced footprint. If it's that some can't be protected from flooding, that's a false premise. With Category 5 protection, every neighborhood can be rebuilt."

Last week, meanwhile, in what appeared to be a pre-emptive defense against such critiques, a coalition of religious and civic leaders announced a tentative commitment to back the commission's plan, though many of its members conceded they knew few of its details.

Mike Cowan, the organizer of the group and head of the city's Human Relations Commission, argued that supporting a "good-enough plan" was far preferable to the alternative: "free-market chaos, also known . . . as every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost." Cowan added: "Without a vision, the city that we love perishes. New Orleans becomes Detroit South."

### **Carefully chosen words**

While Cowan's group is trying to prevent the debate from becoming divisive, the coalition had noticeably few black faces. And those African-Americans who were there, including Edith Jones of the local Urban League chapter and Carol Bebelles of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, were extremely cautious in their endorsement of the commission's plans.

Nagin himself has been sending out what some view as mixed messages on the footprint question. He has generally indicated that he thinks all neighborhoods should be rebuilt, to a degree, and said he's not convinced that any sections of town should be "bulldozed."

But at the same time, Nagin has said that residents who wish to repopulate certain areas -- he has not specified which ones -- need to be aware that city services, public investment and other amenities are likely to be concentrated elsewhere.

Cognizant of the minefield they're navigating, members of the mayor's commission have also been choosing words, and positions, very carefully.

After the ULI's proposal was shouted down, the land-use committee first pitched a three-year window in which neighborhoods would be allowed to redevelop on their own, with areas that failed to thrive targeted for buyouts after that period.

The three-year time frame was quickly whittled down to a year. And more recently, leaders of the subcommittee have been talking about a much shorter period -- perhaps two months -- during which they would gather input from struggling neighborhoods about whether evacuees plan to return. That data would then be used to make decisions about where to focus redevelopment, or whether to even allow it.

The commission is said to be debating whether to name six areas that would have to reach certain densities or face possible buyouts. But whether that notion will see the light of day when the commission unveils its plan Wednesday is unknown at this point.

### **Anger and suspicion**

Thomas said some African-Americans take as gospel that there is a "conspiracy theory" afoot to keep them from returning. If so, the suspicions are fueled by the city's lackluster record in taking care of its poorest citizens, the council president suggested.

Commission co-chair Major agrees. "A lot of the anger is not about what happened during Katrina, but what happened in this city in the past and what can happen in the future," she said.

That Katrina's floodwaters affected black residents more severely than white residents is a matter of statistical fact. Using flood maps and block-by-block data from the 2000 census, city consultant Greg Rigamer estimates that about half of the city's white citizenry experienced minimal or no flooding. By comparison, fewer than a quarter of black New Orleanians were so lucky.

Given that discussions of shrinking the city tend to focus on abandoning flood-prone areas, a reduction in the city's size would likely have a disproportionate effect on areas largely populated by black residents.

Those proposing a smaller city emphasize that the last thing they want to do is discourage the return of people whose damaged homes are outside the new footprint. But even if such people are technically welcome, some African-American leaders -- including some commission members -- worry that many black residents who found shelter in the East and other reasonably priced areas could be priced out of a more narrowly configured city.

Whereas the ULI panel recommended focusing resources in and around functioning areas, some leaders advocate the opposite approach.

"People say we've got to grow out from where it is least damaged," Major said. "Maybe we should grow it out from where it's most damaged."

The fault lines surrounding the topic may lead Nagin's committee to eschew specifics when it comes to the footprint question. But some observers, among them Janet Howard of the nonprofit Bureau of Governmental Research, think that would be a serious mistake.

Question of blight

After all, the footprint question is in many ways the cornerstone upon which many other decisions rest. How the city rebuilds its infrastructure, where it builds new schools, where it locates cultural institutions and parks and libraries all depend in large part on the city's physical shape.

Howard recently unleashed a biting critique of the group's still-evolving land-use plan, calling it "no plan at all." Her argument is simple: The city's infrastructure -- roads, sewer, water, schools, firehouses, police and the like -- was built to serve a population of 630,000, the zenith reached in the 1960 census. As the city's population fell, sinking to 462,000 last year, blight and the ills that accompany it infected many parts of the city.

Analysts guess the city's population will rebound to anywhere from 250,000 to 300,000 over the next few years -- still less than half its high-water mark. If the footprint isn't pared back, Howard said, further blight is inevitable because the city's tax base is unlikely to be able to support an infrastructure so extensive.

"If you're taking the position you can rebuild everything, well, you can't have an area designed for 630,000 people holding 250,000 without a spotty pattern of development," she said. "You just can't."

By the time Katrina hit, New Orleans' streets were already a national disgrace, and the city had for years been operating under a federal mandate to fix its disintegrating sewer system, which was polluting Lake Pontchartrain.

The cost of providing police and fire protection and garbage pickup over a sparsely populated metropolis also should be considered, Howard said.

Howard acknowledges that she doesn't know how much money might be saved in those areas by making the city more compact. That's one of her frustrations. "They've got to do the analysis," she said.

Though unpopular in many quarters, the ULI panel's recommendations -- which included buying out most of eastern New Orleans and Gentilly and parts of Lakeview, the Lower 9th Ward, Broadmoor, Mid-City and Hollygrove -- were at least based on a matrix of measurable factors. Among them: land elevation, the depth of floodwaters, the number of days neighborhoods were underwater, flooding history, historic value and vulnerability to future floods.

The mayor's land-use panel thus far has not specified whether it will abandon the ULI report in whole or in part or, if it does, what alternative criteria will be used to determine which areas should be rebuilt first. Panelists, however, have made clear they hope to use citizens' stated intentions as one gauge. Whatever decision is ultimately made, Howard believes the process will be far less unpleasant if the panel announces clear and understandable benchmarks for its determinations.

"I think the lack of clarity and defined criteria feeds suspicions and animosity," Howard said. "You hear assumptions that certain areas are not going to be rebuilt. I don't know how anyone can make those assumptions until they've clearly articulated the criteria for rebuilding."

Howard's ideas were echoed by Steve Goldsmith, a former mayor of Indianapolis who now runs the Innovations in Government program at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Goldsmith, who has been providing advice to the mayor's subcommittee on government efficiency, said that as a politician he would sell the strategy based on which neighborhoods will be helped first rather than which ones might not be helped soon, or ever. But a decision to just distribute the money across the entire city would be folly, he said.

"There's just no way for urban investment to work in city like New Orleans, even pre-Katrina, if you sprinkle investment everywhere," he said. "It's unfair to the community to pretend you can do everything, because you can't."

Years ago, Goldsmith said, he was given a tour of a tough, inner-city neighborhood in Baltimore by then-Mayor Kurt Schmoke. The city was pouring money into the area, and Goldsmith asked Schmoke why residents of "the crack-infested area across town" weren't complaining of being ignored.

"He said, 'We've got to start somewhere and demonstrate that we can do it,' Goldsmith recalled. " 'I told those folks we only have so many resources, and we're going to prioritize them and get to you next.' At some level you just have to say, 'We're going to start here.' "

Goldsmith said he began Indianapolis' program of neighborhood revitalization by targeting seven areas. It didn't work well, he said, because resources were spread too thin.

"Everyone who has been involved in urban economic development and rejuvenation of neighborhoods would agree that concentrating your efforts geographically is the way to help the greatest number of people," he said.

"The trick is doing it in a way that strikes people as fair. The priorities have to be made according to a transparent set of guidelines," Goldsmith said. "If it's, 'Some of you are going to win, and some of you are going to lose, and we're going to decide who wins and who loses,' that's a recipe for impasse. It's going to have to be more nuanced."

## **Buyouts**

Even if the mayor's commission doesn't take a firm stand on the footprint question, those who ultimately control the billions of dollars expected to flow into the region -- the federal government and the state-chartered Louisiana Recovery Authority -- may wind up deciding the matter, if indirectly.

Observers are optimistic that buyout legislation similar to that sponsored by U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge, will pass, perhaps by next month. Under the Baker bill, a public authority would buy flooded properties from willing sellers, giving them 60 percent of their equity and closing out their loans.

Once such a law is passed, homeowners' choices will come into much clearer focus. Owners of a flooded home will be able to compare the cost of renovating or rebuilding against the money they would receive by selling out -- allowing people to escape the limbo they've been in since Aug. 29.

The FEMA flood maps are expected to further clarify owners' options.

Many homes in New Orleans were built before the current maps, which date to 1984, were adopted, and they would not have been allowed to be built as low as they are

under current rules. Such noncompliant homes are "grandfathered" into the national flood insurance program, run by FEMA -- unless they were "substantially damaged" by the flood. Substantial damage is defined as damage that would cost more than 50 percent of a home's value to repair.

The new maps could make redeveloping homes in low-lying, hard-hit parts of town prohibitively expensive, making a buyout much more attractive to homeowners in those areas. For instance, if the owner of a flooded home on a slab will be forced to raise his house 3 feet off the ground to get a building permit, the cost might make the project a non-starter.

"The new FEMA maps are the data that's going to drive our decision-making," said Reilly of the state recovery authority. "And my prediction is that data will shrink the footprint of the city."

Walter Isaacson, vice chairman of the state recovery authority, said the maps will make homeowners' decisions easier.

"At a certain point, common sense will prevail in areas that are repeatedly listed by FEMA as dangerous," he said "Insurance premiums, building codes and FEMA regulations ultimately will make it difficult to rebuild there."

If the mandates from FEMA are science-based -- and a reasonable buyout option exists -- Isaacson said the debate could become less volatile.

Of course even science is subject to interpretation. The city's chief technology officer, Greg Meffert, who oversees the city's permitting process, said that the administration is demonstrating considerable flexibility in how it applies the 50 percent rule when owners come seeking permission to rebuild flooded houses. Many homeowners want the number altered. When they appeal, city officials are trying to give them what they want, Meffert said, provided it's a close call.

"If it's a 'gray zone' call, virtually 100 percent of the time, we're going to go in the direction of where the resident wants us to go," he said.

FEMA officials, who adopted the "50 percent rule" in an effort to avoid repeated catastrophic flood claims on the same property, have thus far remained silent on the city's flexible approach.

But the practice could have the effect of encouraging homeowners to rebuild their flooded homes as they were pre-Katrina, because doing so might well be more financially attractive than taking flood-mitigation steps or selling out under the Baker legislation.

Reilly said he doesn't much care for the idea.

"In my view, the rule is there to help keep people safe," he said. "I can't say I'd be in favor of bending those rules to do something that might put people's lives in danger. I would hate to see people making short-term, expedient decisions and doing something that could cause loss of property or loss of life because they're trying to beat the clock on permitting."

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 11, 2006 Wednesday

4 MONTHS TO DECIDE;

Nagin panel says hardest hit areas must prove viability; City's footprint may shrink; full buyouts proposed for those forced to move; New housing to be developed in vast swaths of New Orleans' higher ground

BYLINE: By Frank Donze and Gordon Russell, Staff writers

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 1

Residents of New Orleans areas hardest-hit by Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters would have four months to prove they can bring their neighborhoods back to life or face the prospect of having to sell out to a new and powerful redevelopment authority under a plan to be released today by a key panel of Mayor Ray Nagin's rebuilding commission.

In perhaps its boldest recommendation, the panel says Nagin should impose a moratorium on building permits in shattered areas covering most of the city, while residents there meet to craft plans to revive their neighborhoods. The proposals are spelled out in the final report of the land-use committee of Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back commission, which was obtained by The Times-Picayune.

Addressing the debate about whether planners and politicians should declare areas off limits or allow market forces to determine the city's future, Nagin's panel clearly sought a compromise by instead proposing a process to gauge residents' intentions to return to their neighborhoods. But ultimately, commissioners say, not every neighborhood will be sustainable and there will be a need to use eminent domain to seize some property. The panel proposes the creation of a new public agency, tentatively called the Crescent City Redevelopment Corp., to use that power, but only as a "last resort."

While debate has focused heavily on the hot-button footprint issue, the report also proposes a number of lofty ideas that could change the cityscape, including a light-rail system, large mixed-income neighborhoods and new parks that double as additional flood protection.

The panel's recommendations -- along with those of six other subcommittees advising the mayor on various subjects ranging from education to culture to infrastructure -- are not binding; it will be up to Nagin to endorse them, modify them or ignore them. Nagin has been receiving regular briefings from the group

and commissioners say he is on board with most of the major concepts in its report.

Ultimately, the rebuild blueprint, the product of three months of work by hundreds of participants, also must pass muster with the White House and the Louisiana Recovery Authority, the state agency empowered with disbursing billions of dollars in federal aid.

Practically since the day the storm passed through New Orleans, the question of whether all of the city's neighborhoods can or should be resettled has been the most contentious issue in play. The idea of "shrinking the footprint" has been particularly unpopular among African-American leaders and residents, who made up nearly 70 percent of the city's pre-Katrina population and who were much more likely than white residents to live in areas devastated by flooding.

Commissioners on Nagin's panel expect that the mere mention of expropriating the homes of people who want to rebuild will ignite a firestorm of protest. In hopes of lowering the temperature of the debate, their report calls for a much more generous buyout option than the most visible program to gain traction thus far, the bill proposed by U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge. The Baker bill, which stalled in Congress' last session but is expected to be heard again in the upcoming weeks, would pay homeowners no less than 60 percent of the equity they have in their homes, while the banks holding those mortgages also would settle for no more than 60 percent of the balance.

The Nagin panel, acting on the assumption that something akin to the Baker legislation will pass, is proposing to make homeowners in buyout areas whole by tapping federal Community Development Block Grants to cover the remaining 40 percent, so that those forced to sell would wind up getting all of their equity back. Buyout prices should be figured on a home's pre-Katrina market value, minus insurance settlements, the report says.

Homeowners in areas that are not slated for buyouts would have the option of voluntarily selling to the newly chartered redevelopment authority. However, they would receive 100 percent of their equity only if they purchased another home in the city, according to a commission member familiar with the plan. Otherwise, they would receive only the 60 percent provided in the Baker plan.

The report estimates the rebuilding effort will cost more than \$17 billion, with the largest portion -- \$12 billion -- devoted to buyouts. The second most expensive line item is for new light-rail lines that would crisscross the city, at a cost of \$3.3 billion.

While the price tag is certainly eye-popping, members of the commission don't believe their wish list is unrealistic. They have been in constant contact with Donald Powell, the federal czar named by President Bush to oversee Gulf Coast rebuilding efforts. Moreover, Joe Canizaro, the banker and developer who chairs the land-use panel, is a leading Bush fund-raiser with enviable access to the White House.

Bush is scheduled to visit New Orleans on Thursday, where he is expected to meet privately with Nagin and Mel Lagarde, the health care executive who co-chairs the commission.

On Friday, the panel will present its plan to the state authority, which will disburse federal aid as it flows to the state. Ultimately, the plan's success is contingent at least in part on the reception it receives from the LRA and the White House.

In an effort to impress upon federal officials the unprecedented scope of the storm's destruction, the panel has included an image in its PowerPoint presentation that superimposes the city's flooded area onto Washington, D.C. In the slide, the White House and the Capitol sit in the middle of a 22-mile-wide swath of flooded area.

The report is peppered with other factoids intended to drive home the impact of the storm. One frame shows that 108,731 households -- about half the homes in the city -- in New Orleans took on more than 4 feet of floodwater. Another slide shows a map of the diaspora caused by Katrina, with New Orleanians scattered across all 50 states.

#### Meetings planned

The land-use report euphemistically designates parts of town that will have to prove their viability to rebuild as "neighborhood planning areas." Essentially, the depth of post-Katrina floodwater was the determining factor in creating the map of those areas, which includes parts of Lakeview, Mid-City, Gentilly, Broadmoor, the 7th Ward, the Lower 9th Ward and much of eastern New Orleans.

The report recommends that residents of all city neighborhoods -- whether they flooded or not -- participate in a process to help sketch out a vision for their future. The boundaries of 13 districts established by the City Planning Commission, which cover the entire city, would be used as the basis for gathering neighborhood input.

Ten of the 13 districts -- all but one of the districts on the east bank -- contain sections that flooded extensively. The planning process would have a far greater impact in those inundated areas than in dry ones that are now up and running.

In lightly damaged sections, mostly clustered along the Mississippi River and a few natural ridges, residents may convene to discuss ways to enhance their already functioning neighborhoods -- lobbying for a new park or library, for instance.

The purpose of the meetings in hard-hit areas, by contrast, would be to determine whether they have a future at all.

First and foremost, the question facing such areas would be whether they would be able to reattract "sufficient population" to warrant investment in city services and facilities, the report says. The report does not specify what the threshold will be to satisfy that requirement, though some commission members have

indicated they'd favor a requirement that well over half of residents signal a plan to return.

In hopes of helping people make their decisions, the panel is urging the Federal Emergency Management Agency to release within a month the advisory floodplain maps the agency is now creating. The maps, used to calculate required home elevations as well as flood-insurance rates, could have a dramatic impact on homeowners' decisions. If the new maps require homes to be built much higher in certain areas, for instance, the cost to residents could be prohibitive, discouraging resettlement.

In areas where it appears that interest in returning is spotty, residents will be nudged toward coming up with a plan that consolidates their neighborhood into a smaller, more sustainable footprint. In all cases, the goal of the panel is to create mixed-income and mixed-use areas that are easily accessed by public transportation and close to amenities like parks, schools, libraries, grocery stores and cultural attractions.

The report says that neighborhood-by-neighborhood analyses should be overseen and assembled by teams of professional planners, who commissioners say already have committed to work on the project. In addition to urban designers and architects, the report recommends that each team include local leaders, a planning commission representative and experts in finance and public health.

Along with the key data about how many displaced residents are planning to come back, the neighborhood plans are supposed to include recommendations about what types of public facilities are needed, where they would be located and the type of private development residents would like to see.

The report is silent on the mechanics of how planners would seek input from displaced residents. Commissioners say they're likely to hold most meetings in New Orleans, on the assumption that people who truly feel they have a stake in the city's future would make an effort to be heard. However, they left open the possibility that the charettes would be taken on the road.

The commission is advocating an ambitious timeline. For example, if Nagin signs off on the recommendations on Jan. 20, the day the last of the seven committee reports is due to be presented, the four-month clock would start ticking -- meaning May 20 would be the day of reckoning for moribund neighborhoods. Property acquisition in buyout areas could start by August, the report says.

Adding a wrinkle to what is sure to be a volatile process, the planning exercises would take place against the backdrop of mayoral and City Council elections, tentatively scheduled for late April, with runoffs a month later.

### Opportunity for change

The land-use panel's report is titled "Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City" -- an indication that the commission views the disaster as an opportunity to correct some of the flaws that characterized pre-Katrina New Orleans.

In particular, the plan calls for major improvements to the transit and parks systems, each of which would serve a secondary purpose of providing backup flood control. For instance, new rail lines would be slightly elevated, creating "internal levees" to isolate flooding. Parks would include retention ponds to help control storm runoff.

While nothing is written in stone, the plan envisions massive buyouts of damaged residential property, which would allow for the possibility of greatly expanding the city's open space. The report recommends linking the various parks with neutral grounds and covered canals, some of which could feature bike paths.

The report suggests six residential areas that could accommodate large parks, depending on whether those areas fail to recover fully: Broadmoor, Gentilly, the 7th Ward, the Lower 9th Ward and two sections of eastern New Orleans between Chef Menteur Highway and Interstate 10.

A state-of-the-art transit system, modeled after those in Denver and Portland, Ore., is a key element of the plan. It calls for a small expansion of streetcar service, augmented by light rail lines extending to the lakefront along Elysian Fields Avenue and Canal Boulevard, upriver along South Claiborne Avenue and downriver along St. Claude Avenue and Chef Menteur Highway. Another line would cross the Crescent City Connection, which is designed to accommodate trains.

The report also envisions commuter trains linking the city to Louis Armstrong International Airport and Baton Rouge in the west, and to the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the east. Commission members have said, however, that those are longer-term and more expensive projects, and for that reason, they did not request money for them in their budget for the plan.

Because light-rail lines have fewer stops and travel more quickly than streetcar lines, the panel will recommend that stops along those lines be targeted as hubs for larger developments.

The report also recommends that a number of large tracts be demolished and repackaged as "infill development areas" for commercial or industrial projects with housing for workers nearby. The dozen sites identified in the report include a number of public-housing developments, including one in Central City in the vicinity of the C.J. Peete and Guste complexes; a huge parcel in the area of the Florida and Desire complexes; and another around the St. Bernard complex.

Other areas are identified as "infill" sites as well, including the portion of the Lower 9th Ward on the lake side of North Claiborne Avenue. While no mention is made in the report of any specific plans, commissioners say they have been approached by private developers -- whom they have declined to identify -- interested in pitching large-scale projects.

Though maintenance of the flood-protection infrastructure is largely outside the local government's purview, the report recommends that the federal government launch a program of wetlands restoration to provide a buffer against hurricanes. It asks for the closure of the controversial Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, or MRGO, blamed for much of the flooding in eastern New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish.

Pumping stations should be built at the edge of Lake Pontchartrain, the report says, so they can continue to operate while gates at the mouths of drainage canals are closed. And the panel urges the governor and Legislature to move quickly to create a single agency supervising levees in southeast Louisiana, rather than the multiple levee boards that exist now.

Down to the wire

Some of the important details contained in the commission's final report offer evidence that panelists' thinking has continually evolved over the past few months, and even the past few days.

For instance, the footprint question emerged in November, when the Urban Land Institute advised the commission to focus rebuilding efforts in areas that sustained little damage and to delay redevelopment of the hardest-hit areas.

When that notion drew public fire, panelists instead floated the idea of a three-year period during which neighborhoods on the bubble would have a chance to prove themselves. That timeframe was quickly whittled down to a year, before the panel settled on the proposed four-month window.

Likewise, panelists had serious discussion about prohibiting rebuilding in certain parts of town, at least in the near term, along the lines of the ULI report. But the decision was ultimately made to pursue the neighborhood planning process rather than having the panel dictate where to foster development and where to block it.

Commissioners also said the decision to recommend closing the MRGO came only after weeks of contentious debate. And population estimates, which in earlier iterations of the report were far rosier, have been revised to a less optimistic estimate of 247,000 by September 2008 -- around half the city's pre-Katrina population.

The suggestion to temporarily ban building permits in heavily flooded areas also was a last-minute addition, commissioners said. The rationale, they said, was that it would be unfair to allow homeowners in those areas to pour sweat and money into their homes, only to condemn them months later.

It could not be determined Tuesday how many homeowners have already received building permits in devastated areas. But city officials have said they are issuing more than 100 permits a day.

It's also unclear whether the buyout program will include provisions to cover the renovation costs of homeowners who already have rebuilt in neighborhoods that wind up being bought out.

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Times-Picayune, January 12 article refers to the meeting the night before says Nagin has "doubts" about the building permit moratorium part of the BNOBC plan. -

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 13, 2006 Friday

N.O. building permits going like hotcakes;  
New plan 'kind of put the pedal to the metal,' one resident says

BYLINE: By Susan Finch, Staff writer

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 1

While Mayor Ray Nagin said he's likely to reject a recommendation that the city impose a four-month moratorium on building permits in areas flooded badly after Hurricane Katrina, many residents rushed to City Hall on Thursday to make sure they have the right permits, just in case.

City safety and permits chief Mike Centineo said he wasn't sure the long line outside his seventh-floor permits office at late morning was a reaction to publicity about the moratorium proposed by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, but several people in line mentioned it as a factor.

Media reports about the moratorium idea -- "talking about I can't get my permit" -- spurred Woodrow Still Sr.'s trip downtown to apply for permits to fix one house he owns in Pontchartrain Park and another in Mid-City.

"Get that stuff off the news. They need to quit panicking everybody," Still said.

Babs Bellini, standing in line with Still, said talk of a moratorium "kind of made it a little more urgent" for her to make sure she got a permit to rehabilitate her flooded home in Lakeview. "It kind of put the pedal to the metal."

The permit-getting process didn't seem to be running very smoothly -- at least before lunch -- on the seventh floor, where those waiting weren't informed until they reached the head of the line that to apply for a building permit they needed a damage assessment -- a document they could get only on the eighth floor.

There, each person took a number and sat waiting until being summoned by a Safety and Permits staffer who demonstrated how to use city computers set up in the hallway to download damage assessments and get a building permit, as long as their damage was less than 50 percent.

The eighth floor also is the place where property owners with damage assessments higher than 50 percent can ask a building inspector for a lower figure. Owners granted reductions must wait 48 hours -- giving time for the new figure to make it into city records -- before they can apply online for a permit.

Uptown resident John Hazard said he'd waited in line on the seventh floor for more than 30 minutes before he was directed upstairs to apply for the permits he needed to repair two rental houses he owns on Octavia Street.

Hazard left City Hall after applying online, and getting, a building permit to repair one of the houses and winning reduction of his damage assessment on the other house to below 50 percent.

He had high praise for the eighth-floor operation: "I was amazed how easy this was," Hazard said.

Centineo told reporters his department continues to issue about 150 building permits a day.

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 14, 2006 Saturday

Blanco panel backs 4-month process;  
State authority will control purse strings

BYLINE: By Laura Maggi, Capital bureau

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 1

BATON ROUGE -- Gov. Kathleen Blanco's hurricane recovery panel gave a warm reception Friday to the Bring New Orleans Back Commission's proposal for a four-month planning process to determine which flood-devastated neighborhoods can be successfully revived.

Mayor Ray Nagin told the Louisiana Recovery Authority he will back the plan, with some changes.

"As far as I am concerned, this plan is the way we are going to go, with some tweaks," Nagin said before a presentation by John Beckman with planning firm Wallace, Roberts & Todd LLC. Joe Canizaro, who led the crafting of the urban planning proposal, and commission co-chairman Mel Lagarde also attended the meeting, as well as Donald Powell, President Bush's federal coordinator for hurricane recovery.

While the proposal has ignited a storm of controversy in New Orleans, where many people have criticized the notion of rebuilding only some ruined neighborhoods, the members of the state board were overwhelmingly positive. The approval of the authority could be essential in the coming months and years, because the proposal calls for channeling federal money through the governor's panel.



Authority member Matt Stuller, the owner of a jewelry-manufacturing company in Lafayette, said he was excited about the plan, though he expects tremendous challenges will arise. Stuller said it will likely be difficult for the city to get an accurate gauge on whether people who say they want to move back home will actually return -- making the planning process more difficult.

Authority members said the plan could help ensure that people returning to the city will settle in neighborhoods that are the least vulnerable to hurricanes. "I would not want somebody to put me in harm's way," said Norman Francis, president of Xavier University and chairman of the recovery authority.

Nagin has qualms

During the public comment period, New Orleans City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis repeated what many council members have said about the proposal: that city leaders should emphasize rebuilding the entire city. Specifically, Willard-Lewis said she has deep concerns about one of the most controversial proposals: a moratorium on building permits during the four-month planning period.

Nagin, too, continued to distance himself from that aspect of the proposal. "I'm pretty uncomfortable with it," he told the panel. "We are still issuing permits as we speak."

Blanco has commended the proposal, although when asked by reporters about the moratorium controversy, she declined to take a position. "I'm convinced the best place to air those out is in the city of New Orleans," she said.

One major question for the Nagin commission's proposal, however, will be how to come up with the money to buy out homeowners in neighborhoods that cannot be rebuilt. Both Blanco and the Nagin commission back the idea proposed by U.S. Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge, to compensate uninsured and underinsured homeowners for their losses during the recent storms.

Baker's bill was questioned last month by some in Congress who worried about the proposal's price tag. The White House has voiced similar concerns, although Powell said Friday that the Bush administration "shares common goals" with Louisiana politicians on the Baker bill.

The status of the Baker proposal was a prime topic at the recovery authority meeting, with Baker asking the board to hold off on spending \$6.2 billion in recent federal Community Development Block Grants on initiatives to compensate homeowners until he has a chance to get his bill through Congress. The grant money could be better used instead on programs to support cash-strapped businesses, Baker said.

While Mississippi has decided to use its federal grants to help certain underinsured property owners, several officials said the scale of the problem in Louisiana made that an inefficient use of the money. Instead, they touted the Baker plan, which would pay off participants' mortgages and compensate them for about 60 percent of their equity.

Helping businesses

The authority approved the first proposals Friday to spend \$341 million of the federal money to provide interest-free loans for small businesses and to fix damaged state and local government infrastructure.

The \$100 million in "bridge loans" to help struggling businesses make ends meet during the aftermath of the storms was a particular priority of the Blanco administration. Those proposals will be given to the Joint Legislative Committee on the Budget next week. If approved, they will be sent to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for final ratification.

Because the federal housing agency also needs to develop rules for the federal aid, proposals sent by the state are not expected to receive immediate action. Blanco said while waiting for federal approval she has ordered the state Division of Administration to lend \$30 million in regular block grants to the bridge loan program for immediate use. The money will be reimbursed once the new federal dollars arrive.

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Staff writer Robert Travis Scott contributed to this article.

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 14, 2006 Saturday

Ornery Council bucks the plan;  
ALSO: Stay on sideline; their votes are in

BYLINE: By Bruce Egger and Frank Donze, Staff writers

SECTION: METRO; NEW ORLEANS POLITICS; Pg. 1

Aside from the imposition of a four-month moratorium on building permits, Mayor Ray Nagin made clear that he likes the ideas his Bring New Orleans Back Commission recommended this week for rebuilding the city.

The City Council made clear it hates them, especially the basic premise that some hard-hit neighborhoods will have to be left out as the city recovers from Hurricane Katrina, and that neighborhoods will have only a few months to prove they deserve rebuilding.

Five of the seven council members signed a statement presented Friday to the Louisiana Recovery Authority saying the commission's recommendations "could result in a blatant violation of private property rights" and run counter to the council's position that all neighborhoods deserve equal treatment and should be rebuilt simultaneously.

The two members who did not sign, Eddie Sapir and Jay Batt, have expressed similar sentiments.

Former Mayor Marc Morial and some of the city's state legislators also expressed their opposition to the Bring New Orleans Back plan.

Morial, now president of the National Urban League, went on national TV to denounce the commission's proposal, which he called a "massive red-lining plan wrapped around a giant land grab." Many homeowners will not be able to settle with their insurance companies if they do not know the future of their neighborhoods, he said.

Is there any way to bridge the gap between the sides?

Possibly.

Eliminating the four-month moratorium could lower the temperature of much of the criticism.

"Telling people they can't rebuild for four months is tantamount to saying they can't ever come back," Morial said, though making clear his criticisms went well beyond that one idea.

It also appeared that one reason for the council's ire, beyond its disagreement with some of the commission's basic ideas, was pique that council members had not been briefed on the panel's ideas before reading about them in The Times-Picayune.

Asked about the council's dismay about being left out of the loop, developer Joe Canizaro, one of the chief architects of the limited-resettlement strategy, admitted the commission could have communicated better with local and state lawmakers.

"Their feelings are they weren't involved in the process," said Canizaro, who was chairman of the committee that crafted the land-use proposals. "And I can't argue with them. . . . I see now that we should have been more aggressive in attempting to get them involved."

Mel Lagarde, the health care executive who co-chairs the commission, said he is willing to work with anyone -- from the mayor to the council to legislators to Congress -- "as long as we are moving forward with the redevelopment of this city posthaste."

But in the end, is there any chance that council members worried about losing large chunks of their districts will sign on to the idea of turning many neighborhoods into green space?

Don't bet on it.

And Lagarde delivered a warning to anyone who might want to use the controversy to stir up a political circus: "If I sense, as a commissioner or as a citizen, that . . . we're going to start picking sides, we're going to start worrying about electoral cycles or we're worried about other things that are in some way

going to get in the way of redevelopment of the city . . . then, I think you are going to see the tone change a good bit."

The commission basically thinks if its ideas are accepted by Nagin, the state recovery panel and the White House, it doesn't matter much what the council thinks. The council, not surprisingly, does not agree.

THEY COULD AFFORD IT: When a full-page ad headlined "Why Hold City Elections on Time?" ran in The Times-Picayune on Dec. 15, many people wondered who was behind it. The sponsoring group was identified only as Concerned Citizens for Elections Now.

A smaller version of the ad ran several days later, again arguing that holding mayoral and council elections as soon as possible was both required by law and "the right thing to do" at a critical moment in the city's history.

It turns out the ads, which cost about \$15,000, were paid for by some of the city's most prominent citizens, including many who are socially active or involved in civic groups such as the Bureau of Governmental Research.

According to one of the organizers, the sponsors were Harry Blumenthal, Ralph Brennan, Vaughan Fitzpatrick, Louis Freeman, Richard Freeman, Bill Grace, David Guidry, Paul Haygood, Rick McMillan, Anne Milling, Hunter Pierson, Poco Sloss, Benton Smallpage, Peter Waters, Tommy Westfeldt and Philip Woollam.

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 15, 2006 Sunday

Twist & pout;  
Sulky council feels out of control — and acts it

BYLINE: James Gill

SECTION: METRO - EDITORIAL; James Gill; Pg. 7

After the sidelining of its clueless School Board, New Orleans watches its City Council going the same way.

Council members are doing their best to hasten their slide into irrelevance by playing dog in the manger as the recovery effort takes shape. They have evidently failed to pick up on the post-Katrina public mood. Our patience with the childish squabbles of tinpot politicians is exhausted.

Council members feel they have been frozen out of planning for the city's reincarnation. They got their feelings hurt when only one of their number,

president Oliver Thomas, was appointed to Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring Back New Orleans Commission.

Council members have long been on the outs with Nagin, whom they accuse of a chronic failure to communicate, but this time they went into a major sulk.

Their principal contribution to the recovery debate until last week was to pass a resolution in December supporting "the timely and simultaneous rebuilding of all New Orleans neighborhoods."

That seemed merely to be a fit of spleen, or an attempt to embarrass Nagin and his commission. It seemed unlikely that even the New Orleans City Council could be so stupid on the subject of urban planning as to believe that "the timely and simultaneous rebuilding of all New Orleans neighborhoods" was either feasible or desirable.

There would, for a start, be nobody to live in all those neighborhoods; huge numbers of evacuees have no intention of returning and it is projected that New Orleans won't regain even half its pre-Katrina population until 2008. New Orleans has been losing population for decades, and the antediluvian landscape was dotted with abandoned houses.

It is blindingly obvious that many of the areas where flooding was heaviest will be more likely to accommodate nutria than people henceforth. There is no point in hankering for the old footprint. It's been washed away.

This is a bitter pill to swallow for property owners in the hardest-hit areas and for all those who have managed to persuade themselves that pre-Katrina New Orleans was every inch a paradise. Thus there was bound to be an outcry when the Bring New Orleans Back Commission recommended a four-month moratorium on building permits in deluged neighborhoods while we figure out where there will be enough people to justify starting over.

In neighborhoods that are truly kaput, the commission calls for property owners to be recompensed on the public dollar.

Several property owners bristled at the public unveiling of the recommendations, and declared the government had no business telling them what to do. Some of them no doubt will be subject to delay that will turn out to be needless as their neighborhoods are revitalized.

But in other ravaged neighborhoods, the owner of a rebuilt house marooned in a sea of blight could hardly expect taxpayers to provide the services required to sustain civilized life.

Property rights may be sacrosanct but they are not absolute, and government has an obligation to protect the general interest through planning and zoning laws.

Still, the frustration of the property owners who spoke at the unveiling of the report was fair enough, and Nagin himself later declared that he was unlikely to support the moratorium.

He is, however, in favor of the four-months planning review. How that would work with people throwing up houses in every remote corner of the city was not explained. In the end some kind of moratorium seems inevitable.

Angry property owners can, perhaps, be forgiven for some of their less temperate remarks. Still, it was probably a little fanciful to suggest that the commission's planning subcommittee chairman, banker and developer Joe Canizaro, devised the plan to further a private land-grab scheme in the Lower 9th Ward.

There can be no forgiveness for the furious posturing with which council members greeted the recommendations, however. They seemed about ready to fit Nagin for jackboots.

Jacquelyn Brechtel Clarkson's charge that the commission had just proposed "a blatant violation of property rights that is unprecedented in America" typified the measured tone of the press conference called just before the recommendations were released.

The council will no doubt do its best to thwart whatever plan Nagin finally endorses, but its options are limited; the feds and the Louisiana Recovery Authority will control the purse strings.

That's why the council's so mad.

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 15, 2006 Sunday  
Correction Appended

New flood maps will likely steer rebuilding;  
But FEMA says it's still too soon to guess what they will look like

BYLINE: By Gordon Russell and James Varney, Staff writers

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 1

The new federal flood maps for New Orleans scheduled to be released this year will provide critical information for residents trying to decide whether -- or how high -- to rebuild their damaged homes, members of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back commission say.

The maps also could drive new building codes and standards that try to minimize future flood damage, should city leaders decide to adopt them quickly.

For those reasons, one of the key recommendations of the commission's land use panel was to urge the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which draws the maps, to release preliminary versions within 30 days.

But that's unlikely to occur, something Joe Canizaro, chairman of the BNOB's land use committee, conceded shortly after the panel issued its report Wednesday.

In fact, New Orleans area residents who are eager for guidance from FEMA as they decide how to go about rebuilding are likely to find themselves in a dilemma. If they rebuild now, all they have to go on is the current required elevations, which may -- or may not -- be substantially changed when the new maps are released. Yet even if they wanted to voluntarily use the latest elevation information and get started renovating their homes, they can't -- it's not available.

It likely will be about two months before FEMA can provide any new data to the city, according to Gary Zimmerer, FEMA's lead engineer for the mapping project. Even then, Zimmerer said, the agency likely will not release maps, but only provide "advisory information" about what the new maps are likely to show.

While there has been plenty of speculation that the new maps could change dramatically from the current ones, drawn in 1984, and thus slow the recovery process by requiring homeowners in heavily flooded areas to build much higher, Zimmerer said it is too soon to guess what the new maps will look like.

Preliminary maps probably won't be available until summer, Zimmerer said. Once those are released, city officials will be able to appeal them in part or in whole while FEMA works on the final versions. When the maps are finalized, the city must adopt them or be shut out of the National Flood Insurance Program, which is administered by FEMA.

So for now, and likely for the next year or so, the 1984 maps on the books are the law of the land. The upshot is that citizens looking to renovate may do so without raising their floor levels as long as they fall into one of two categories: Their homes already meet the "base flood elevation" required in the 1984 maps, or their homes did not receive "substantial" damage as defined by FEMA, meaning more than 50 percent of the structure's pre-Katrina market value.

Those who follow those rules cannot be dropped from the flood program, and their flood insurance premiums can rise no more than 10 percent a year.

However, some experts warn that, while rebuilding now under the old maps may be the cheapest option -- particularly for homes built on slabs -- it's not necessarily the smartest, nor the most cost-effective over the long run. The higher that homeowners build, the less likely they are to flood, so the lower their flood insurance rates will be.

Moreover, if owners of homes that were inundated during Katrina choose to rebuild and subsequently suffer another flood at a later date, FEMA may force them to raise their homes at that point by declaring them victims of repetitive flooding.

Marc Levitan, director of Louisiana State University's Hurricane Center, said rebuilding right at the 1984 base flood elevation means there's a 26 percent chance a home will flood at least once during the 30-year course of a typical mortgage.

"If you build to base flood elevation, there's an alarmingly large chance that you'll be flooded at some point," Levitan said. "You're just asking for problems. I strongly urge communities to seriously consider adopting local flood plain ordinances that take the FEMA maps as a minimum and add to that."

Residents in limbo?

How the delay in getting good data from FEMA will affect the ambitious four-month neighborhood planning timetable proposed by Nagin's land use committee is unclear.

The plan presented by Canizaro's committee calls for the teams that will steer the process for the city's 13 planning districts to begin meeting by Feb. 20. One of the main charges for those teams will be to identify which residents plan to return, and whether they plan to try to resettle in their old neighborhoods.

By March 20, according to the committee's report, the teams are to have completed that work, though the final plans for each of the 13 districts are not due until May 20.

Reed Kroloff, dean of Tulane University's School of Architecture, and architect Ray Manning, the two men Canizaro has charged with overseeing the planning process, said they wish the data could be made available sooner, but they don't believe the delay will significantly set back progress.

For now, the two said they will be focusing on devising a process to gather input from as many New Orleanians as possible, and amassing data and information to help those people make decisions about their future. That work can continue without the flood-plain data, they said.

Kroloff acknowledged that many displaced residents will have a difficult time determining their best course without the best flood information, but he said others are likely to have already made up their minds one way or another.

"There may need to be some adjustments" to the schedule, Kroloff said. "But it doesn't mean we can't be gathering information already. We can still start canvassing. There are some people who are going to return no matter what, and some who aren't.

"I believe we can still make important progress with the initial time frame, although it would be better if we had the information sooner. The intention is to keep (the process) as tightly focused an exercise as possible, to move through it with speed and care that works to the advantage of New Orleanians."

Kroloff, like Levitan, said he believes residents wishing to rebuild in flood-prone areas would be wise to wait for the new data -- even if they can legally rebuild now.



"If I were putting my lifetime savings in the single biggest investment I'll ever make, I'd want to make sure I had minimized every possible risk," he said. "And this isn't a small one. I'd want to get the data I need to make a decision if it were my money."

Manning agreed for the most part, but said he believes people who are renovating flooded homes that didn't receive catastrophic damage should not feel they have to wait.

"If I were making a decision about building a house from the ground up, I would certainly wait until March to make my plans," he said. "But if I'm gutting and renovating, I would go ahead."

Kroloff believes the lack of current data is a powerful argument in favor of the land use panel's recommendation that Nagin impose a four-month moratorium on building permits in flooded areas. Nagin has so far indicated he's unlikely to support such a measure.

"New Orleans is not the first city to suffer a significant natural disaster," he said. In other places, he noted -- Kobe, Japan, and Grand Forks, N.D., among them -- "people have stepped back and given themselves time to rationally consider the best process for proceeding."

#### Complicated process

The slow pace in New Orleans' receipt of its new flood data -- communities along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi received preliminary maps months ago -- owes in part to the complexity of the city's flood-protection and drainage systems, Zimmerer said.

Models must take into account a complex system of levees, pumps and drainage canals, variables that aren't present in Mississippi, he said.

Zimmerer said the first question the modeling process seeks to answer is this: How high will storm surge push the levels in local waterways in a 100-year storm?

Once that question is answered, the models will attempt to determine whether the water will overtop any of the city's levees, Zimmerer said. If the models show water would overcome the levees, it could have a dramatic impact on the maps.

The 1984 maps assume that the levees hold back the surge, and are thus designed to calculate elevations based only on the amount of rainfall generated by a once-a-century storm.

It's standard procedure for FEMA's models to first analyze whether levees will hold back the storm surge, Zimmerer said, even though the Army Corps of Engineers says the levees are designed to hold back a 200-year storm.

"We look at what's the worst-case scenario; is it the storm surge or the rainfall?" Zimmerer said. "We're not saying that we're overtopping the levees at this time. We're doing an analysis."

The officials and agencies designing the model have not yet determined whether the levee system in its current form will be used, or whether the model will reflect ongoing and planned work on the levees, Zimmerer said. City officials are arguing that the \$2.9 billion in levee improvements coming to south Louisiana must be considered, along with the plan to block Lake Pontchartrain storm surge from entering drainage canals.

The new maps also will factor the new elevations of various points in the city as measured by the National Geodetic Survey, which maintains a system of 85 "monuments" around southeastern Louisiana. The monuments -- brass disks implanted into public rights of way -- feed information to satellites that is converted into elevation.

Dave Zilkowski, acting director of the Geodetic Survey, said some parts of town may have fallen by as much as a foot since the 1984 flood maps went into effect due to steady subsidence of the land. But subsidence varies depending on the neighborhood, he said.

The new heights will be "as close to reality as you can get," Zilkowski said.

Time to debate

While Mississippi was in some ways lucky to get new FEMA maps quickly, New Orleanians might want to be careful what they wish for as well.

Douglas Otto, chief of hydrology and hydraulics for the corps' Mobile branch, said the new federal maps in Mississippi used tidal data from Katrina and Hurricane Camille, which struck Pass Christian in 1969. The results were drastic new elevation requirements, particularly in Hancock County, that will require buildings to be constructed much higher there.

Though Hancock County bore the brunt of both storms, Otto noted, the area is not necessarily more vulnerable than any nearby sections.

"Basically what they did is they took the observed high-water marks and did a statistical analysis," he said. "That's why it came out pretty quick. But it was based strictly on what has happened in the past. I'm not sure it's the best approach. To me, it's not a real great indicator of where these storms are going to hit in the future."

New Orleans, like the Mississippi Gulf Coast, has had substantial flooding from two hurricanes in the past 40 years: Katrina and Betsy, which struck in 1965. However, unlike the Mississippi coast, New Orleans has upgraded its flood protection system. But it's not clear how the New Orleans measures will affect the new maps.

The effects of the new maps in New Orleans will be determined not only by what the maps say, but how residents and politicians choose to use them.

Once preliminary maps are released this summer, officials here will have perhaps a year to debate the virtues and shortcomings of the maps before they become binding.

In the meantime, local officials will have to decide which flood maps to enforce. Do they want to stringently enforce the 1984 maps now on the books, adopt the new maps, or perhaps require that new construction meet an even higher standard?

Many of the homes in the city, because they were built decades ago, are well below the base levels required under the 1984 maps now in effect. To a large extent, it will be up to City Hall to require homeowners wishing to rebuild such structures -- if they are heavily damaged -- to raise their houses.

In terms of future development, city officials will likely find themselves under pressure to allow building right at the base flood elevation determined in the new maps. But Levitan thinks going further would benefit everyone in the long run. In his view, the city may want to encourage homes be built atop garages in flood-prone areas.

"Some of the buildings that were elevated survived without much problem," he said. "A lot of neighborhoods that saw 2 to 6 feet of water, well, what if you just had the garage under the house? OK, the tool bench and the junk you had stored down there got wet, so you clean that up and throw it away."

While crucial to New Orleans, levees shouldn't be seen as the only line of defense against storms, he said.

"You need a belt and suspenders; you need multiple lines of defense," Levitan said. "The first line is the wetlands, and we've got to restore them. The second is the levee system. Then if water gets past that, and the buildings are elevated, you've got another level beyond that."

"In some cases, levees can be our worst enemy, because what happens is that while they provide protection from more frequent storms, they don't protect us from the larger ones. And what happens is you've encouraged people to build lower."

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 15, 2006 Sunday

A Responsible Plan

SECTION: METRO - EDITORIAL; Pg. 6

Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans' landscape in ways that would have been unimaginable to most of us before the storm washed over the city.

With so many houses in ruins and so many residents scattered across the country, it is unrealistic to expect the city to be rebuilt exactly as it was. Not every resident will come back. Not every home can be saved. That doesn't have to mean that New Orleans becomes a lesser version of itself. The city can be rebuilt with the same charm. It can retain the qualities that are so important to its residents: devotion to neighborhood, connection to history, reverence for tradition.

But that will not happen spontaneously. Without a practical, clear-eyed plan, some homeowners could find themselves alone amid blocks of rubble and blight.

The land-use committee of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back commission has outlined a responsible plan for rebuilding based on a four-month planning and evaluation process for damaged neighborhoods. Critics were quick to seize on a proposed moratorium on building permits in those areas and the possibility of forced buyouts, but residents shouldn't let controversial issues turn them off to the plan.

After the stormy reaction last week, the moratorium may be scrapped. If so, residents in badly damaged areas should be warned that they could be sinking money into a house in a neighborhood that may not make it. As for buyouts, homeowners who lack the resources or desire to rebuild or those who find themselves alone in a blighted neighborhood may well be eager to sell their property to a government-backed entity.

Clearly, no plan is going to please everyone. Some people complained last week that four months is too much time to spend planning, and others complained that it is too little.

The land-use committee's notion of getting residents' input on their neighborhoods is a fine one, though. The city would be divided into planning districts, and residents would be encouraged to come up with a blueprint for their area.

The planning period also is supposed to be a time for a realistic evaluation of which areas will be able to bounce back. The death of neighborhoods is an uncomfortable idea for many people, and understandably so, but it may be unavoidable in the aftermath of Katrina.

The land-use committee had talked earlier about waiting three years to figure out which neighborhoods are viable, but that would have left homeowners in limbo. Four months, by contrast, should be long enough for citizens to determine whether they want to return to their neighborhoods and what they want their neighborhoods to include. It also should be long enough for Congress to pass a bill by U.S. Rep. Richard Baker that would provide for voluntary buyouts of flooded-out homes.

The Baker plan is crucial. It would release homeowners from their mortgages and give them at least 60 percent of the equity in their homes. The land-use committee hopes to find a way to up that percentage to 100 percent to make residents whole.

The buyout plans differ in a significant way, however. Rep. Baker's legislation calls for voluntary buyouts, while the land-use committee proposal includes the use of eminent domain to expropriate property, if the situation warrants doing so.

Even with the promise of a buyout, the idea of requiring people to move will be controversial. As harsh as it seems, though, it may be necessary. The city will not be able to afford to provide services to sparsely populated neighborhoods. Nor is it wise to allow hundreds of damaged houses to sit and rot.

The land-use committee's plan is not perfect. Some obvious questions remain: How can the city measure a neighborhood's interest in rebuilding? Can New Orleanians simply call in from Dallas to indicate their wishes, or should homeowners have to take a more significant step to prove their willingness to return?

Those sorts of details will be vital to whether the plan works. Just as crucial is political leadership. Mayor Nagin and other elected leaders need to be willing to make tough decisions now and once the four-month period is up.

So far, members of the City Council seem to be assuming that all residents of flooded-out neighborhoods want to return to their homes and rebuild no matter what. But people whose homes took on water up to the gutters may have different ideas.

City officials can't control for every variable, and they can't wave a magic wand and return New Orleans to its pre-Katrina state. What they can do is embrace a responsible plan for redeveloping a great city.

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 15, 2006 Sunday

**Let us decide on rebuilding, residents say;  
Don't stymie neighborhoods, city officials told at meetings**

BYLINE: By Frank Donze

SECTION: METRO; Pg. 1

Staff writer

Sending messages tinged with confusion, frustration, anger and a dark sense of humor, hundreds of displaced New Orleans residents who trekked to City Hall Saturday for a public meeting on the city's rebuilding stuck to a common theme: No one can tell them where they can or cannot live.

The high anxiety evident among the crowd of more than 500 that jammed the council chambers appeared to be a product of a controversial recommendation handed down last week by Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which said some

flood-ravaged neighborhoods may have to prove their viability before rebuilding is allowed.

"I will sit in my front door with my shotgun," said Alex Gerhold, one of dozens of people who spoke during the nearly 5-hour session. "I was forced to live in Gramercy. Nice place, not home!" he added, eliciting cheers.

Nagin, who attended part of the event, said again that he's "uncomfortable" with the commission's recommendation to impose a four-month moratorium on building permits in flooded areas, noting that his administration continues to issue permits. But he did not say he had ruled out the idea of halting construction.

For many residents in attendance, the possibility of having to move to other parts of the city if their area does not come back seemed an unacceptable scenario.

Leonard Merriman III, a 28-year Navy veteran, drew roars of laughter when he described how he might react to an attempt to order him off his property: "I can drop bombs, done it! I can shoot, done it! I can fly an airliner and escape all in the next day."

Adopting a more somber tone, Merriman said civil disorder could erupt soon, particularly among African Americans, if the city's elected leadership doesn't begin to clear the bureaucratic roadblocks facing many of those struggling to return.

"If the situation continues to erode, we are going to incite people to do what this city never did," he said, noting that New Orleans was one of the few large American cities that did not experience rioting following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

Saturday's "emergency meeting" was convened by District D Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, whose constituents hail from some of the neighborhoods hardest hit by Katrina, including Gentilly, Pontchartrain Park and parts of eastern New Orleans.

Just back from a visit to the Netherlands with a Louisiana delegation studying flood control, Morrell said she was disturbed by the commission's suggestion that redevelopment in parts of her district be put on hold until residents prove their desire to rebuild. Morrell said the Dutch, who live 20 feet below sea level in some places, took the opposite approach after a devastating flood in 1953. "They didn't move the people," she said. "They secured where the people live."

Some of the more pointed criticism Saturday was directed at developer Joe Canizaro, a member of the Nagin commission who headed the land-use committee recommending the building moratorium.

Community activist Malcolm Suber urged those attending to speak out loudly against the idea.

"The question that we have for ourselves is: Are we going to allow some developers, some hustlers, some land thieves to grab our land, grab our homes, to

make this a Disney World version of our homes, our lives?" Suber said, mentioning Canizaro by name. "The question is: Are we going to take that?"

Many in the chamber responded with shouts of "No!"

Holding her baby daughter in her arms, Armtrice Cowart, said she has been unable to decipher the signals emanating from city government about which neighborhoods will or won't be allowed to redevelop.

"I'm the first college graduate from my family," she said. "But it's a different language to me."

Glenn Trotter told Morrell that he has taken matters into his own hands, completing about 90 percent of the renovation work in his home without bothering to get a single permit.

The District D event wasn't the only community gathering on Saturday.

At 4 p.m., more than 100 residents and other advocates for the Broadmoor neighborhood gathered on a Napoleon Avenue neutral ground, saying they are trying hard to rebuild -- despite major hurdles with city permitting and the slow restoration of utilities. Residents said they don't want their area considered for demolition and park space, a possibility raised by the Nagin advisory board.

Objecting to the board's placement of "a large green dot over our homes," Virginia Saussy, an organizer of the Broadmoor rally, said some of her neighbors are halting work on their homes as a result of the commission's call for a building moratorium. The advisory group has become an obstruction to rebuilding, she said.

"We want the mayor to know that we're here," she said. "We've been challenged to show that our neighborhood is alive. We are."

Also meeting Saturday were residents of Lake Vista, where Nagin also heard protests about the proposed moratorium, said Nagin's spokeswoman, Tami Frazier.

Nagin arrived at Morrell's event after 2 p.m. to address the 50 or so residents who stayed until the end. Asked if District D residents should halt construction on their homes in light of his commission's recommendation, Nagin said, "Absolutely not. You should continue to rebuild."

Nagin described the commission's report as a "process" that will not be complete until he reviews the suggestions and seeks more public input. "If you don't hear a pronouncement from me," nothing is final, he said.

Nagin said he continues to have safety concerns about some parts of the city and has mentioned the Lower 9th Ward as an example. But he said "District D is not one of those areas."

Coleman Warner contributed to this report.

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## Transcript of Nagin's speech

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin gave this speech Monday during a program at City Hall commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. Tuesday, January 17, 2006 I greet you all in the spirit of peace this morning. I greet you all in the spirit of love this morning, and more importantly, I greet you all in the spirit of unity. Because if we're unified, there's nothing we cannot do.

Now, I'm supposed to give some remarks this morning and talk about the great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. You know when I woke up early this morning, and I was reflecting upon what I could say that could be meaningful for this grand occasion. And then I decided to talk directly to Dr. King.

Now you might think that's one Katrina post-stress disorder. But I was talking to him and I just wanted to know what would he think if he looked down today at this celebration. What would he think about Katrina? What would he think about all the people who were stuck in the Superdome and Convention Center and we couldn't get the state and the federal government to come do something about it? And he said, "I wouldn't like that."

And then I went on to ask him, I said, "Mr. King, when they were marching across the Mississippi River bridge, some of the folks that were stuck in the Convention Center, that were tired of waiting for food and tired of waiting on buses to come rescue them, what would he say as they marched across that bridge? And they were met at the parish line with attack dogs and machine guns firing shots over their heads?" He said, "I wouldn't like that either."

Then I asked him to analyze the state of black America and black New Orleans today and to give me a critique of black leadership today. And I asked him what does he think about black leaders always or most of the time tearing each other down publicly for the delight of many? And he said, "I really don't like that either."

And then finally, I said, "Dr. King, everybody in New Orleans is dispersed. Over 44 different states. We're debating whether we should open this or close that. We're debating whether property rights should trump everything or not. We're debating how should we rebuild one of the greatest cultural cities the world has ever seen. And yet still yesterday we have a second-line and everybody comes together from around this and that and they have a good time for the most part, and then knuckleheads pull out some guns and start firing into the crowd and they injure three people." He said, "I definitely wouldn't like that."

And then I asked him, I said, "What is it going to take for us to move and live your dream and make it a reality?" He said, "I don't think we need to pay attention anymore as much about the other folk and racists on the other side." He said the thing we need to focus on as a community, black folks I'm talking to, is ourselves.

What are we doing? Why is black-on-black crime such an issue? Why do our young men hate each other so much that they look their brother in the face and they will take a gun and kill him in cold blood? He said we as a people need to fix



ourselves first. He said the lack of love is killing us. And it's time, ladies and gentlemen.

Dr. King, if he was here today, he would be talking to us about this problem, about the problem we have among ourselves. And as we think about rebuilding New Orleans, surely God is mad at America, he's sending hurricane after hurricane after hurricane and it's destroying and putting stress on this country. Surely he's not approving of us being in Iraq under false pretense. But surely he's upset at black America, also. We're not taking care of ourselves. We're not taking care of our women. And we're not taking care of our children when you have a community where 70 percent of its children are being born to one parent.

We ask black people: it's time. It's time for us to come together. It's time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans. And I don't care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day.

This city will be a majority African-American city. It's the way God wants it to be. You can't have New Orleans no other way; it wouldn't be New Orleans. So before I get into too much more trouble, I'm just going to tell you in my closing conversation with Dr. King, he said, "I never worried about the good people -- or the bad people I should say -- who were doing all the violence during civil rights time.'" He said, "I worried about the good folks that didn't say anything or didn't do anything when they knew what they had to do.'"

It's time for all of us good folk to stand up and say "We're tired of the violence. We're tired of black folks killing each other. And when we come together for a secondline, we're not going to tolerate any violence." Martin Luther King would've wanted it that way, and we should. God bless all.

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

January 22, 2006 Sunday

Nagin says he'll oppose building moratorium;  
Any homeowner can rebuild, mayor vows to residents during Lakeview  
appearance

BYLINE: By Gwen Filosa, Staff writer

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 1

A confident and determined Mayor Ray Nagin said Saturday that he will oppose a moratorium on issuing building permits in flooded neighborhoods to galvanize rebuilding and uphold property owners' rights.

"I'm not going with a moratorium," Nagin said of a committee's recommendation to hold off on permits for four months, in an appearance before hundreds of Lakeview residents. "We're going to keep going forward."

It was a welcome message for many in the majority-white crowd still reeling from statements in Nagin's Martin Luther King Jr. Day speech that New Orleans will be a "chocolate" city again, and that God wants the city to be majority African-American.

At one point during the two-hour question-and-answer session at St. Dominic's Church in the heart of the flood-ravaged neighborhood, Nagin reached out to the audience and once again tried to explain his Monday comments. Almost all of the meeting, however, was devoted to a fact-laden litany on rebuilding -- including Nagin's pledge to oppose a four-month moratorium on issuing building permits in flooded areas.

Nagin had publicly voiced his discomfort with such a moratorium. But on Saturday, he firmly committed to supporting any homeowner's right to rebuild, even at the risk of a jack-o'-lantern effect, when one resident could wind up the only person living on a block.

"I'm a property-rights person," Nagin said. Of a scenario with gap-toothed neighborhoods vying for city services, he said: "It's not something I would recommend, but I'm not going to be moving forward with a four-month moratorium."

Report due soon

The moratorium idea came from the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which is due to release its final report on economic development on Friday. A two-week period to gather citizen feedback will follow before the complete report is published, Nagin said.

Overall, neighborhoods that come to a quick consensus on their plans for rebuilding most likely will receive the best results from the city, Nagin said.

"What defines a neighborhood?" he read from the list of Lakeview residents' questions. "You," he answered.

Nagin answered residents' questions on everything from levee repairs to concerns over still-broken traffic and street lights.

After all, he was speaking to residents in one of the hardest-hit areas, where a drive down Canal Boulevard is a tour of devastation, with vacant homes still sporting filthy water lines from the disastrous flooding caused by levee failures.

More than one hour into the meeting, Ann Marie LeBlanc broke the silence over the "chocolate" city gaffe and asked the mayor to explain himself.

"No. 1, your comments were racist-sounding," said LeBlanc, a white lawyer who lost her home to the floodwaters. "No. 2, they weren't really smart. What was going on in your head? I want to stay, but I need to hear it from you."

"I'm going to ask you to walk in my shoes for a minute," Nagin said.

No rewind button

Nagin said that emotional stress from witnessing Hurricane Katrina and a history of accusations that he doesn't care about black people led to his nationally televised, inappropriate comments.

Nagin said that when he was elected, he took heat for taking an inclusive approach to city government.

"I took great pains to bring in every segment of the community," he recalled. "I got attacked. I was called 'Ray Reagan,' and that 'white man in black skin' stuff. I had a stigma that Ray Nagin does not care about black people."

Residents cheered his mea culpa and his promise that he wants people of all races to repopulate New Orleans. It was his most detailed public response to the speech that left residents puzzled over both his intent and his ability to keep the city in the good graces of the nation's leaders.

Nagin said he was wrong to say what he did, but that it came honestly.

When he held town hall meetings for evacuees across the South after the storm, Nagin said, "I heard hopelessness and I heard the theory and the feeling that some people weren't welcome back in my city. I carried that around for months. I was emotionally drained. I got in the heat of the moment and said things that I shouldn't. Life does not have a rewind button."

Holly Clement, a Lakeview resident, approached Nagin after the event and said: "You restored my faith in you."

"It's not my intention to hurt anybody," replied Nagin, who said he will seek a second term as mayor and asked the crowd to remember his entire tenure when voting.

Moving forward

"I'm not a typical politician," said Nagin, the former cable company general manager who won as an outsider first-time candidate ready to dismantle the city's longstanding history of public corruption and back-room deals.

"I'm more of a problem-solver, a leader and a visionary than I am a politician," Nagin said. "Sometimes I make mistakes and that's OK because we're all human."

In a mini-stump speech, Nagin said he presided over "the most successful evacuation in the history of the country" in ordering a mandatory evacuation before Katrina made landfall Aug. 29. He said that the evacuation left "only 50,000 residents" in the city.

"I had to cuss out a president and a sitting governor to get the resources we need, and because of that I'm a target of the media and that's OK," Nagin said.

LeBlanc said in an interview later that she voted for Nagin before and probably will do it again. Although his remarks last Monday upset her and left her feeling rejected, she said, she was satisfied with his explanation Saturday.

"I think he's a good person and has gotten a bad rap," said LeBlanc, 44, the mother of three. "I think he handled the question well and I'm now thinking about staying. I don't want to live in a racist city one way or the other."

LeBlanc said what's most important now is to move forward and decide whether -- or how -- to rebuild their flooded homes.

### Lobbying Congress

Nagin said that, unlike St. Bernard Parish, New Orleans has yet to receive a deadline from the federal government on how long they will pay for the demolition of ruined homes. "We'll get that out, and that will drive a lot of behaviors," Nagin said.

Residents whose property was more than 50 percent damaged may send the city a letter asking for demolition at no cost to them, Nagin said, and it will get to the Army Corps of Engineers for review.

Nagin referred requests for demolition to his top housing aide, Alberta Pate, whose office number is (504) 658-4290 and fax number is (504) 658-4238. Information is also on the city's Web site, [www.cityofno.com](http://www.cityofno.com).

The mayor also promised to lobby for more money from Congress, in light of Mississippi's portion of the \$11.5 billion in Community Development Block Grants handed out from Capitol Hill.

Before Congress adjourned last year, it passed a hurricane aid package that included up to \$6.2 billion in grant money for Louisiana and \$5.3 billion for Mississippi, a decision that left Louisiana leaders feeling shortchanged.

"Mississippi got a big chunk of that," Nagin said. "They have the stroke to get what they want and they got it. We have double the amount of flooded homes. In Mississippi, they got \$115,000 per house and we have \$50,000 or \$60,000 per house."

Nagin said the city must "target" the dollars it does have for rebuilding efforts in the most devastated areas, meaning neighborhoods that took 4 feet of water or more.

### Event for homeowners

While Lakeview residents rallied Saturday to rebuild, about 750 homeowners in the Gentilly area did the same at an event on the University of New Orleans campus.

Just as the Lakeview Civic Improvement Association took the matter into its own hands, the local private sector hosted the wide-ranging Gentilly roundtable discussion.

The Home Builders Association of New Orleans and the Preservation Resource Center helped gather experts on lending, construction, flood elevation, permits and other information for property owners.

"Folks are having trouble getting straight answers on what they should do with their houses," said Rob Couhig, a New Orleans businessman and attorney who helped organize the event.

"We get tired of waiting for city and state government to do these sort of things," Couhig said. "I don't know why the mayor isn't having these type of events 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is a huge amount of people who want to come back. There's also a huge frustration with the bureaucracy."

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Times-Picayune (New Orleans)

March 21, 2006 Tuesday

Nagin accepts BNOB blueprint;  
He, panel in tune except on land use

BYLINE: By Bruce Egglar, Staff writer

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 1

After eliminating all recommendations that would have prohibited any of the city's neighborhoods from participating in its rebuilding process, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin on Monday night presented a blueprint for restoring and improving the hurricane-devastated city.

"It will take each and every one of us to pull this off, but if we work together, we can achieve great things," Nagin said at the end of a nearly hour-long speech accepting most of the recommendations presented to him in January by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission.

Nagin appointed the 17-member commission of developers, business people and civic leaders last fall, a few weeks after Katrina flooded most of the city.

Hundreds of people, including at least four City Council members, crowded into a Canal Street hotel ballroom to listen to the speech, which was partly a State of the Union-style laundry list of ideas and initiatives, partly a campaign document for a mayor in the midst of a re-election race.

Applause was infrequent, but Nagin drew laughter when he announced at the start, "I am going to do something I normally hate to do: I am going to read from a script."

Remembering the trouble Nagin sometimes has gotten into with impromptu remarks, notably his "chocolate city" speech on Martin Luther King Day this year, many in the audience chuckled, and one commission member uttered an audible, "Thank you."

Nagin began with the most controversial area of his commission's recommendations: land use.

As he has often done before, he rejected the call by the commission's Urban Planning Committee for a moratorium on building permits in the city's hardest-hit and most flood-prone neighborhoods.

Nagin said he appreciated the committee's desire to protect residents from spending money on houses or stores that could be vulnerable to flooding again and might not be eligible for flood insurance. But, he said, "I have confidence that our citizens can decide intelligently for themselves where they want to rebuild, once presented with the facts."

Follow the citizens

He also rejected the committee's suggestion that hard-hit neighborhoods should have to prove themselves viable, probably by showing that at least 50 percent of residents intend to return, before the city would agree to provide services to them.

"I believe government investment should follow our citizens' investment," Nagin said, without setting up what critics considered arbitrary criteria.

But even as he refused to deny any neighborhood the right to rebuild, Nagin warned residents of the Lower 9th Ward and "the lowest-lying areas of New Orleans East" that the Army Corps of Engineers has told him those areas are likely to flood again if a Katrina-style hurricane hits New Orleans this year or in 2007.

"That's why it's important that you as citizens have the option of rebuilding on your own, or taking advantage of the buyout option in the Failed Levee Homeowners Recovery Program I pioneered," Nagin said. That option, if it wins state and federal approval and financing, would offer homeowners up to \$150,000.

Nagin said he supported the proposal that each neighborhood in the city participate in a planning process to spell out how residents would like to see their neighborhood redeveloped. Such a process "puts the decisions in the hands of the residents," he said, to applause. He said he was extending the deadline for completing the process by one month, to June 30.

In response to suggestions that some particularly flood-prone neighborhoods should be turned into green space, Nagin said that "creating new parks and open spaces . . . is vital to future flood protection." But he said he does not support expropriating property for that purpose, only for removing blighted buildings.

Adding proposals

For most of the speech, Nagin kept fairly close to an advance text furnished by his office, but when he got to the final section, on economic development, he added several new pages, proposing or endorsing dozens of ideas ranging from farmers' markets and "risk-capital fairs" to a "coastal restoration and

preservation technology industry cluster" and an "advanced building design and construction technology industry sector."

He called for instituting a living-wage policy for all public contracts, expanding the free bus service between New Orleans and Baton Rouge offered since Katrina, maximizing reconstruction opportunities for local companies, training more construction workers, offering housing subsidies for workers and job seekers, supporting the hospitality industry, matching private investment in the shipbuilding industry, completing the New Orleans BioInnovation Center in the medical district, rebuilding the city's health-care infrastructure and reimbursing hospitals for post-Katrina care.

The ultimate goal, Nagin said, "must be more than recovery. It must be transformation." He said New Orleans should create a program of individual development accounts, with employers matching workers' contributions, that would help reduce economic disparities. "We cannot go back to a city of haves and have-nots," he said.

#### Block grant money

He also said he plans to use Community Development Block Grant money to set up a fund that will make low-interest loans to owners of small businesses, and to create a "retail SWAT team" to assist small businesses, help workers return and provide job training.

On other issues, Nagin:

-- said he "struggled" with the commission's call for ending tax exemptions for property owned by nonprofits. He said he finally decided the city needs "to assess a fee for providing basic public services to nonprofits," except for churches, schools and nonprofits "that serve indigent populations."

-- endorsed the commission's recommendation for a light-rail transit system connecting Armstrong International Airport to the Central Business District and eastern New Orleans.

-- said he favors creating "an independent, autonomous" Crescent City Recovery Corp. to implement the redevelopment process.

-- supported closing, in the "medium term," the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and using federal money to relocate affected businesses.

-- said a short-term program of "levee fortification" and installation of temporary locks, pumps and floodgates at the MRGO, the Industrial Canal and other canals that flooded during Katrina should be complete by June 1, but said "the real solution to storm surge protection" is restoring the state's coastal wetlands. He urged Congress to share offshore oil and gas lease revenue with Louisiana so it can be used for that purpose.

-- described as "a three-headed monster" the city's current public school system, with most schools under state control, some run as separate charter schools and a few under the control of the Orleans Parish School Board. He proposed that the

Legislature create a new "city-run school system" to be led by a seven-member appointed board. The system should remain in place for only five years, he said. "Let's put this issue on the fall ballot and let the people vote," he said.

-- said he favors consolidating the city's seven assessors' offices into one, if the voters agree. Such a move could save \$1 million a year, he said.

-- also supported merging the civil and criminal sheriffs' offices into one and consolidating some "police districts with law enforcement authority" with the New Orleans Police Department, as a way "to maintain our current status as one of the safest urban areas in America." The last comment drew gasps and murmurs of disagreement from some in the crowd.

-- said he does not support merging the civil and criminal court systems, as recommended by the commission, because the cost savings from such a move are not clear. But he said he would favor further study of the issue to determine the cost-benefit ratio.

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Miller-McCune Magazine

### **No Easy Solution**

**A flood of ideas has brought unacknowledged progress toward a "new" New Orleans, but big business still has to be persuaded to invest.**

**By: Jed Horne** (former editor of the Times-Picayune and subsequent editor on online weekly "The Lens") | March 04, 2008 | 10:56 AM (PST)

There were those, of course, whose post-Katrina vision for New Orleans was no New Orleans at all. Or at least not a New Orleans that was going to involve much in the way of national investment. Proponents of this view ranged from former House Speaker Dennis Hastert, who later recanted, to racists and religious fundamentalists eager to see a majority black city with a reputation for moral lassitude punished for its sins. And then there were environmentalists for whom New Orleans' ruin was a rhetorical convenience in debates about global warming, only more useful so long as that ruin appeared irremediable.

Fortunately – or unfortunately, depending on your politics – the native resilience of New Orleans, in combination with the kindness of strangers from all around the world, has trumped the negativists, mainly by ignoring them. New Orleans is not going away, for the time being, anyway. A recovery, of sorts, began within days of the 2005 hurricane and, though still anemic, appears to be gaining vigor.

The nostrums recommended for post-Katrina New Orleans – the "new" New Orleans – have been no-brainers. They have been intoned mantra-like by groups small and large ever since the first of the huge post-Katrina congresses in which residents and government officials began plotting a road back: decent schools, better jobs and housing, a first-world flood defense, a more regional approach to economic development, a more equitable medical system, a less corrupt political class. Elaborating on these key themes, the blue-ribbon panels first charged with implementing that vision – the mayor's Bring New Orleans Back commission, the



governor's Louisiana Recovery Authority, and the months-long experiment in participatory democracy that came up with UNOP (the Unified New Orleans Plan) – gave voice to more idiosyncratic ideas. There would be housing built, as it once was in New Orleans, not on ground-level slabs but in ways that take cognizance of repetitive flooding risks; more parks, retention ponds and green space to absorb rain and floodwater; the clustering of public infrastructure – schools, senior citizen centers, satellite medical clinics, police stations and libraries – to revive neighborhoods and achieve economies of scale; a nurturing of social clubs and organizations (Carnival krewes, for example) close to the heart of the city's cultural ethos.

And the no-nos have been just as widely embraced. In its zeal to remake itself, residents warned, New Orleans must not let gentrification – or worse yet, Disneyfication – destroy the funky indigenous culture of jazz and Creole cooking, second-line parades and Carnival revelry that is a magnet for tourism and a cultural treasure.

The federal housing vision, preceding the storm and advocated only more urgently afterward, has been to "Hope VI" New Orleans' sprawling and crime-ridden public housing projects – replace them, that is, with mixed-income communities developed through public-private partnerships. Furious debate slowed that process, given widespread suspicion of the government's motives, especially at a time when a dearth of low-income housing argued for hastily restoring the projects rather than bulldozing them. But in mid-December, as police subdued an angry crowd of several dozen housing activists and preservationists struggling to disrupt the proceedings, the City Council sided with tenant leaders who favored the overhaul and voted unanimously to demolish four of the biggest projects – provided the feds met certain stipulations for their redevelopment designed to keep former tenants from being lost in the shuffle.

Lurking within the many debates – certainly including the one over what to do with the housing projects – has been an issue almost too delicate to mention. Pre-Katrina New Orleans was a city with an indigent population demonstrably larger than it could – or would – support. The causes were complex and interdependent: white flight, decades of continuing disinvestment by the corporate sector, a refusal by taxpayers to significantly upgrade an atrocious school system, and a political class skilled at siphoning revenues from the public purse rather than maintaining critical infrastructure.

The results were predictable and chronic: crime; illiteracy; addiction; infant mortality; disintegrating housing projects, water mains and school buildings; an antiquated port; and so forth. Forced removal to other cities – the so-called diaspora – exposed some low-income residents to their first experience of legitimate employability, to schools where their kids actually learned to read. It was possible to share the eye-opening delight of these evacuees while regretting that it might mean their permanent departure from New Orleans. But there was another, more sinister vision inspired by diaspora: the racist vision of a city cleansed of the poor – poor blacks, to be precise. Those subscribing to this vision generally did not mince words, at least in conversations among themselves. Their fantasy, however, did not long remain tenable.

In short order, New Orleans had recovered enough of its population to be, once again, the raffish, brawling, ethnically complex place it had always been –

spiraling murder rate and all. But two years after Katrina, there is reason to worry that the city's revival has already hit a plateau that lies far short of the "new" New Orleans envisioned in the early, anxious days just after the floodwaters were pumped out. The urgency of that moment gave birth to high hopes: that Katrina had laid bare long-standing pathologies in New Orleans' political culture that would no longer be tolerated; that the very scope of the disaster would call forth federal and philanthropic largesse on an epic scale (nest-featherers and humanitarians alike rubbed their hands in glee); and that, of course, the failure of the federal levee system would be atoned for with the immediate creation of a state-of-the-art flood defense worthy of a great city in a first-world country.

Some of these assumptions have been borne out. In hindsight, though, the most important of them was sadly naïve. As the rest of the city's recovery progressed in fits and starts, the federal government approved – and New Orleanians have so far accepted – a patchwork approach to levee repair that leaves the city one storm from annihilation and clouds any hope for a full renaissance.

First, the good news, some of which flies in the face of widespread misconceptions about New Orleans. Catastrophe has accelerated change, a lot of it utterly inconceivable even five minutes before Katrina struck and much of it positive. Among the highlights:

- Consolidation of old political sinecures and the requirement that future officeholders know at least as much about their respective areas of operation – tax assessment, levee management and court management, for example – as about the patronage and cronyism that were the principal focus under the ancien régime.
- The state's successful acquisition from the feds of a share of offshore oil and gas royalties, an annual revenue stream that will grow considerably in the future but that even now is enough to leverage financing to halt erosion and restore coastal marshes, a critical buffer between New Orleans and onrushing hurricanes.
- An extraordinary string of successful prosecutions of corrupt politicians by the U.S. Attorney in New Orleans, Jim Letten – amounting to a real turning point in a city that long regarded dirty pols as an inevitability, even an amusement. Not to be outdone, the City Council named an inspector general to fight corruption in City Hall and then defied a mayoral maneuver that would have underfunded the office.
- The state takeover of the Orleans public school system (not without howls of dismay from the teachers' union and a largely sidelined school board), making for the nation's largest experiment in charter schools as a way to force educational reform.
- A decision by the Department of Veterans Affairs and state officials to join forces and achieve economies of scale in rebuilding Charity, the city's public hospital, and the treatment facility for wounded and aging veterans that was also destroyed in the storm.

Among post-Katrina political accomplishments, another stands out at the state level: the election of a most improbable governor. Inaugurated in January, Bobby Jindal is a whiz-kid conservative technocrat, an immigrant couple's son with an Ivy League pigskin on his office wall and a Rhodes scholar line on the résumé. The first governor in U.S. history who traces his ethnic heritage to India, he is also the first Louisiana governor of color since Reconstruction. More to the point, as aggressive reformers go, Jindal is from all appearances the real thing.

Unfortunately, government also has had to account for some of Louisiana's biggest disappointments, starting with the root of all misery, the collapse of the federal levee system, and continuing with lethally stupid blunders by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the White House in the storm's immediate aftermath. Fecklessness in New Orleans City Hall has done its part to weaken the recovery, as has the infuriating clumsiness of the Road Home bureaucracy set up by a private firm under contract to the state to distribute federal guilt money to residents whose homes were damaged or destroyed by levee failure. Government's shortcomings have been offset by the work of nonprofits and informal community associations, the second leg of the three-legged stool that is the American way of getting stuff done.

Habitat for Humanity plunged into the breach and has been fast at work ever since Katrina on a whole village of new houses that people of minimal means – musicians especially – can acquire through sweat-equity. With greater razzle-dazzle, in December the movie actor Brad Pitt rolled out his vision for affordable, environmentally enlightened housing. After investing \$3 million in a French Quarter mansion, Pitt threw \$5 million on the table and challenged other millionaires and philanthropists to match him. His vision: scores if not hundreds of environmentally "green" houses for displaced residents of the flood-ravaged and now weed-choked Lower Ninth Ward. His Make It Right Foundation juried a competition among worldwide architects to come up with 14 cutting-edge designs – some of them even float – that qualified residents can choose among.

Whether Pitt's vision catches on – whether, indeed, it is wise to throw resources into a place as vulnerable as the low-lying neighborhood he has chosen to rehabilitate – remains to be seen. But his presence in New Orleans fulfills the hope of a well-heeled cadre of New Orleanians who saw the challenges that recovery entailed as a whetstone on which the city could refine its political instincts and its international reputation for music, art and design. Early plans for a major jazz museum and performance space have been dealt a setback by the retreat of the developer who thought he had coaxed support from the city – which then dropped the ball.

But next fall New Orleans will debut an omnibus arts festival that is being compared, in its infancy, to the Venice Biennale. Moreover, the Legislature has developed a package of tax incentives that may make New Orleans, today one of the busiest movie-making locations in America, an equally attractive environment for the production of legitimate theater.

But the heart and soul of New Orleans' reawakening has been cheerfully unofficial, even anarchic. Faith-based and secular, well-heeled and rough-hewn, volunteers have flooded the city to gut houses, revive neighborhoods, heal the sick and feed the homeless. A cadre of more lasting visitors – filmmakers, freeloaders, teachers, architects, community organizers, entrepreneurs, musicians, idlers and opportunists – has also drifted into the city, taken a look around and, like Pitt, decided to stay, providing a small counterweight to the large number of professional people who bailed out after Katrina. The newcomers have given New Orleans some of the cachet of New York in the 1950s or San Francisco in the 1960s. Or maybe Prague after the Soviet pullout is the better analogy – a city of all-night rap sessions and sky-blue dreams of transformation. New Orleans, in a sense, has become a laboratory for its own reinvention.

The universities – Tulane, Xavier, Dillard, University of New Orleans, Southern University at New Orleans, Holy Cross – have been a linchpin in this process, feeding manpower and other resources into the volunteer efforts, and some of them reorienting curricula to make exposure to the post-Katrina challenges a learning-as-you-serve experience.

Virtually every economic analysis and recovery agenda has recognized the university-linked biotech field as a potential growth sector in an economy that needs to expand beyond tourism, the port and what's left of the oil and gas industry. LSU's decisions to keep its medical school in New Orleans and to rebuild Charity, the city's public hospital, in tandem with the VA are seen as a platform on which biotech will stand.

Which brings us to the bad news. Unlike the government and nonprofits, the third leg of the three-legged stool that is the American economy, the for-profit sector, has turned out to be rather wobbly in New Orleans. And this is particularly concerning, given the great faith placed in it as recovery's mainstay.

Because Katrina struck in the age (or at least at the tag end) of neo-conservative ascendancy, the approved strategies for revival were bound to be heavily market-conscious, not just in Washington and Baton Rouge but, less predictably, in New Orleans itself. That would be so even if the White House were not floating in its own flood of red ink as a result of Iraq. **It would be so even if Louisiana's roguish political culture did not inspire deep skepticism that federal dollars were going to be misapplied or stolen outright. It became especially so when Mayor Ray Nagin, facing re-election in early 2006, turned his back on the tough-love prescriptions for recovery recommended by Bring New Orleans Back consultants: retrenchment from the hardest hit areas and a phased-in recovery that would have focused limited public resources on less damaged areas. Instead, Nagin – who had never run for office when he stepped out of the ranks of corporate middle management to become mayor – adopted a laissez-faire approach and began loudly and frequently endorsing market forces as the key to recovery. Rather than declare a recommended moratorium on rebuilding until recovery strategies could be plotted, he handed out rebuilding permits as though they were campaign flyers, which in a sense they were.**

In some parts of New Orleans, the results today are fulfillment of the consultants' most dystopian vision: lonely sentinels of recovery in a sea of blight, a city sprawling out to its farthest pre-storm extremities but without the tax base sufficient to maintain the infrastructure of schools and policing and firefighting, streets and sewers that, even before Katrina, was languishing.

This federal and local deference to markets – sometimes decried as mere camouflage for indifference or incompetence – has become the shaping force in the post-K vision, in which creative entrepreneurs and well-oiled capital markets pour resources into New Orleans and, more effectively than any government agency, not only revive a city these same forces had largely ignored for decades but transform and improve it.

Just in case markets needed reminding that they were freedom's bulwark, the White House heaped the table high with billions in tax breaks, accelerated depreciation

schedules and other goodies to draw investors to what is being called the Gulf Opportunity Zone.

Alas, the early GO Zone returns were discouraging. In a first major accounting last spring, less than 1 percent of the billions made available as an incentive for private investment went for projects actually based in New Orleans.

This happenstance came as no surprise to Ed Blakely, the urban planner hired belatedly at the end of 2006 as the city's recovery czar. Having recently added housing, economic development and code enforcement to his portfolio, he is arguably the most powerful man in New Orleans government. "The for-profits left here a long time ago," says Blakely, who clinched a reputation for sometimes breathtaking candor with his announcement, early in his tenure, that the New Orleans political class was composed of a bunch of "buffoons," a designation from which he did not seem to exempt his employer, the mayor.

But what to do? How to coax a more vigorous performance from corporate and entrepreneurial America?

All parties to serious discussion about New Orleans – certainly including Blakely, who sidelines as a real estate developer, with a major stake in a thousand-acre play in Southern California – accept that government and philanthropy can't do the job unaided.

Jindal's strategy for reawakening business interest in the disaster zone is, at least initially, unilateral. As might be expected of a conservative who, though Catholic, campaigned on a family-values platform, he took office vowing that his first act as governor would be to call the Legislature into session on a one-item agenda: reforming the state's ethics code. Christian virtue aside, a tougher ethics code would help Louisiana overcome its reputation – recently reinforced by the indictment of Congressman "Dollar" Bill Jefferson on bribery charges – as a place where you can't do business without cutting sticky-fingered politicians in on the deal.

Blakely supports ethics reform, though he is less convinced that its role will be pivotal. After all, he notes, plenty of other markets are rife with corruption. And in other respects as well, Blakely's strategy for New Orleans' recovery bespeaks this more sophisticated – some might say cynical – view of reality. Blakely is a patient man, more patient certainly than the many residents who already scold him for the slow pace of recovery. The scope of the disaster in New Orleans – comparable to another catastrophe Blakely has studied closely, the devastation of Kobe, Japan, following the 1995 earthquake in that Japanese port city – suggests a similarly protracted arc for recovery: 10 years at minimum, he speculates, perhaps as long as 20.

Blakely's hopes for New Orleans' eventual revival are vested in public/private partnerships. His opening salvo upon arrival was to comb through the endless and sometimes contradictory wish lists developed by the Unified New Orleans Plan process and identify what he called "target zones" – 17 of them. Scattered across the city, but concentrated in the older, generally dryer areas west of the Industrial Canal, the zones were targeted for allocation of incentives and direct government investment in infrastructure to entice the for-profits back to the table.

Blakely's further hopes for the economy hinge on refocusing the mission of another of the city's most important assets: the Port of New Orleans. In Blakely's view, the proper strategy at a time when New Orleans can no longer ignore rivals such as Houston/Galveston, Miami or even Mobile, Ala., is for the city to accept a niche role, realizing that vast break-bulk cargoes (excepting crude oil and coffee) will pass through untouched by local efforts to add value. Instead, New Orleans is positioned as a staging area for breaking down manufactured cargoes – above all from China – into smaller loads that can be shipped across the continent by truck or train. And on the way back to Asia via Latin America, the freighters, now too often empty, can be at least partially laded at New Orleans with American manufactures: furniture from the Carolinas, carpeting from Georgia and the like.

Still, an elephant remains in the room, and he's a weirdly quiet beast these days: flood defense.

Just after Katrina, when the federal government demanded that Louisiana overcome fractiousness and, in White House liaison Don Powell's words, "speak with one voice," one item topped every agenda: the need for the finest flood defense money could buy, levees and additional floodgates that would stand up even to Category 5 storms.

It hasn't happened.

Instead, with much fanfare, around the second anniversary of the storm, the federal government rolled out its commitment to the city: a so-called 100-year flood defense, an unfunded patchwork approach that, even if completed in several years, would not necessarily withstand Katrina – a 300-year storm, according to the experts – let alone the truly horrific storms that the Gulf can whip up. Scholars of mass psychology could have a field day with the flood-defense phenomenon. Has the ordeal of protracted recovery given a once high-stepping city a diminished sense of self-esteem and entitlement? Have the gates knocked together at the end of two canals that collapsed had a placebo effect that leaves the city feeling immunized against other points of vulnerability? Whatever the cause, the result can be likened to a process of self-hypnosis: Maybe if New Orleanians don't acknowledge the flooding problem, the for-profit sector won't either.

The Rand Corporation remains un hypnotized. In a report to the City Council, Rand listed uncertainty about the levees as a principal retardant of corporate reinvestment in New Orleans. Blakely, for the record, does not accept the Rand analysis without qualification; the Californian in him has a different perspective. After all, despite an ever-present threat of earthquakes, the Golden State has been able to remain a lodestone for investment, he points out. But there's an undeniable inconsistency to the analogy: Earthquakes can't be averted, but flooding can be all but entirely eliminated. Can be, but hasn't been.

The can-do impulse that once defined the American approach to engineering challenges – the one that dug the Panama Canal and put men on the moon – is suddenly in check when it comes to New Orleans' flood defense. And the feckless flood-protection response from both the White House and Congress has had the

effect of reinforcing a message that the city has long struggled against, a message surely not lost on corporate boardrooms: A majority black, traditionally Democratic city has been deprioritized by the current administration, written out of the national agenda.

And yet, like the river that runs through it, New Orleans keeps rolling along, lucky for the two eerily serene hurricane seasons that followed Katrina. And since the hurricane, New Orleans has repeatedly defied prognostication, sometimes in positive ways, sometimes in negative ones. A truly reassuring federal recommitment to flood defense might not be the silver bullet that slays the corporate world's reluctance to muddy its feet in New Orleans. But it sure seems worth a try. And that would be so even if Washington owed New Orleans nothing for the lives lost, and the hundreds of thousands of houses destroyed, when the levee system collapsed, and the federal government fiddled while much of New Orleans drowned.

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