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BGR REPORTS.....

BGR Calls for Clarity and Increased Public Participation in City Planning Effort

Perhaps the highest priority for the Crescent City today is the creation of a unified vision and plan for redevelopment. The effort must begin with structure: the establishment of a rational, lucid, and clearly communicated planning structure that actively engages the citizenry. This will give residents needed reassurance, instill confidence in investors, and promote buy-in from the federal government.

To lead the City's effort, Mayor Nagin has created the Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Its charge: "to finalize a master plan to advise, assist and plan the direct funding of the rebuilding of New Orleans culturally, socially, economically and uniquely for every citizen." The Commission consists of 17 community leaders and the Mayor. It has retained the Urban Land Institute to assist it.

We are fortunate that the men and women of the Commission are willing to take a leading role in rebuilding New Orleans, even as they struggle with losses in their own businesses and personal lives. Many of them have made significant commitments to the effort, organizing task forces and assembling outside resources to address issues. The redevelopment effort will undoubtedly benefit greatly from their individual and collective efforts.

Citizen Participation

The Commission members' efforts can take us only so far, however. For the resulting plan to have credibility, it must grow out of a clearly articulated, carefully orchestrated, and widely advertised public participation program. Although there are growing efforts on the part of some committee chairs to engage the public, such a program has not been fully assembled.

Currently, members of the general public can speak, as a matter of law, at the public comment portion of the Commission's and its subcommittees' meetings. They can send the Commission comments through the internet. They can participate to varying degrees at the subcommittee level. Some committee chairmen have gone far beyond legal requirements, opening committee membership to anyone interested or actively soliciting public input through other means. The Urban Land Institute has added to its process one town hall meeting in New Orleans and similar meetings in selected cities.

Despite progress, the opportunities are uneven and in some areas inadequate. In addition, access to the available opportunities has been restricted as a practical matter by inadequate communication and outreach. The Bring New Orleans Back web site provides little information on the committees or subcommittees, and attempts to make the public aware of opportunities for public participation have been modest.

We are urging the Commission to develop and communicate clearly to the public an effective and timely public participation program. Such a program should, among other things, provide a series of facilitated forums for discussion of the major issues and take advantage of the internet to disseminate information and allow for interactive web-based communication. It should include a significant outreach program to make citizens aware of the available avenues for participation.

The need for broad-based citizen participation would be important if the Commission were merely supplementing the City's planning process, but it is critical in current circumstances, where the Commission is operating as the City's de facto planning body. Unless the Commission provides the forum, the public will not have the opportunity to participate actively in redefining the City.

Clarifying Structure and Relationships

A significant weakness in the current planning process is the lack of a clearly defined structure at many levels. Among the most serious ambiguities is the relationship between the Bring New Orleans Back Commission and its plan, on the one hand, and the City Planning Commission and the City's master plan on the other.

Although the Bring New Orleans Back Commission is the City's de facto planning body, it is not its official one. The city charter places responsibility for master planning squarely in the hands of the City Planning Commission, directing it to prepare, adopt and modify a long-term master plan for the physical development of the City. Does the Mayor intend to replace all or parts of the current master plan with a plan produced by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission? If so, how? If not, how will its plan be used? Will it become a shadow master plan, guiding public policy without City Planning Commission review or adoption? The issue is of more than academic interest, since the city charter provides that no public project, facility or utility can be approved except in conformity with the official master plan.

Now is definitely the time to bring to the table the expertise of our business and civic leaders and experts from all over the world. It is important, however, that their participation serve to enhance the capacity of, rather than to supersede the role of, the planning body established by the city charter. A clarification by the Mayor of the City Planning Commission's role and its interface with the Bring New Orleans Back Commission could help to allay concerns on this subject.

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BGR is a private, nonprofit, independent research organization. Since its founding in 1932, it has been dedicated to informed public policy-making and the effective use of public resources in the Greater New Orleans area. For more information call 588-2052 or visit BGR's website, www.bgr.org.

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