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**BUREAU OF
GOVERNMENTAL
RESEARCH**

825 Girod Street
New Orleans, LA 70113
Phone 504-588-2052
Fax 504-588-2044
www.bgr.org

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Members of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission
1100 Poydras St., Suite 1030
New Orleans, La. 70163

Dear Commission Members,

At its November 7th meeting, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission asked BGR to offer detailed suggestions on how to enhance citizen participation in the Commission's planning process. We appreciate the opportunity to continue this dialogue.

Effective public participation programs do not occur by happenstance. They are carefully conceived and executed, often with the help of professional consultants. As a first step to developing a program, the Commission should articulate and publish the decision-making process, including what types of decisions will be made, how, when, and by whom. It should then identify the types of public participation appropriate to the various stages of the decision-making process, and set forth as complete a schedule as possible. The Commission should also define goals for public participation, assess challenges, and respond to those challenges. Finally, it should widely publicize the opportunities for such participation. Clarifying the process, creating a participation program, and broadcasting this information to the public will help citizens to make decisions about when and how they can participate.

To these ends, a number of details need to be considered. For example, how many and at what points in the process are public meetings needed? Where should they be located? When should they be held in a centralized location, other cities, and specific neighborhoods? What venues are available to meet needs? Who will lead meetings? Who will organize them? How will citizen input be gathered and incorporated?

Creating and executing a serious public participation program is a major endeavor. The Commission may want to consider hiring a professional facilitator to assist it with this important component of its planning process.

Gathering public input

Public participation programming should be geared toward involving the public in productive ways, adding value to the process. It should be

manifold in approach to ensure a wide audience is drawn in, but clear and focused enough to allow interested participants to concentrate their energies where they see fit. In creating a vision plan, the public should be incorporated into every stage of decision making, lending the process legitimacy and helping leaders to build trust with the public.

Public input should be elicited on several fronts beyond the standard town hall meetings and comment periods of public meetings. Options for collecting input include the following:

- Focused advisory groups that meet regularly can hash out issues.
- In subject matter-based summits or charrettes, a large group can be broken into smaller groups to work on specific issues of manageable size, then report back to the larger group and tie together a vision.
- Interviews of key stakeholders, conducted by trained planners and integrated appropriately into the larger vision, can be a helpful part of the process.
- “Open houses” with informational exhibits on particular aspects of the Commission’s work and comment cards that allow citizens to react can be useful.
- In some cases, polls and surveys, by phone or through a system of registered online participants, can help to gauge the public’s views.
- The web makes an excellent tool for building dialogue and gathering suggestions. The Bring New Orleans Back web site should be interactive enough to allow web-based forums for citizen participation. It can include issue-specific chat-rooms where interested parties can work through issues and a mechanism for collecting e-mail comments to proposals under consideration.
- Another useful technology is so-called “groupware.” This allows citizens in public forums to use instant-response technology to vote on or rate proposals that are placed before them. Groupware is particularly useful in providing citizens with specific visual options for future land uses or urban design guidelines.

We note that some of the Commission’s committees are using one or more of these techniques. We urge the Commission to expand further the opportunities for participation.

Reaching out to the public

Providing timely information to the public about meeting times and the evolution of the planning process is key to citizen participation. Beyond the basics of posting notice of meetings in a public place and on the internet, outreach can occur in a number of ways:

- Taking into account budget constraints, the participation program and the various events can be advertised through public service announcements, press releases, newsletters and mass mailings, and production of special newspaper inserts.
- Information can be provided to neighborhood organizations and other civic groups with access to large databases or memberships of concerned citizens.
- Broadcasting meetings and events via television, web, and radio can extend the reach of the Commission.
- At a time when New Orleanians are far-flung, the Bring New Orleans Back web site can provide depth of information on the activities of the Commission, its committees, and its

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subcommittees. It can function as an information storehouse, opening access to documents and reports used during the decision-making process, posting graphic representations (such as maps, charts, and design concepts), and broadcasting updates and detailed information about meetings.

The Commission could encourage press coverage of participation opportunities and events by targeting reporters whose beats includes specific focus areas, such as economic development, education, and governance, and providing them with core documents and other information. It could provide visual material to appeal to visually oriented print, television, and web media.

During the planning process, it is important to remember that New Orleans is patchwork of unique neighborhoods that today face a variety of problems. Therefore, a successful effort must encourage participation at the neighborhood level. This is not a matter of appeasing community-minded idealism. It is a matter of drawing on the expertise of the biggest stakeholders, people who know their neighborhoods best -- those who live or work in them.

Again, BGR thanks the Commission for its attention to this issue. We hope these suggestions will be helpful.

Sincerely yours,

Janet R. Howard
President & CEO