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BGR MEDIA RELEASE

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BGR calls for further clarifications in revised UNOP citywide plan

Today the Bureau of Governmental Research releases *UNOP Revisited: An Analysis of the Revised Citywide Plan*. It is a follow-up to BGR's March 2007 report, *Not Ready for Prime Time*, which provided an overview and recommendations on the first public draft of the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) citywide product. *UNOP Revisited* analyzes the second public draft (the Revised Plan).

BGR found that the Revised Plan is more lucidly written and professional in tone than the previous draft, and that significant improvements have been made in its approach to ranking projects and programs. However, the document remains in many of its essential features unchanged.

In *UNOP Revisited*, BGR focuses on four problems that are likely to cause the greatest difficulty as New Orleans attempts to move forward:

- Failure to connect flood risk with policy
- Unclear direction for rebuilding

- Premature or unjustified recommendations for specific projects and policies
- The lack of a realistic financial context

Failure to Connect Flood Risk with Policy

As in the earlier draft, BGR found that the Revised Plan does not confront certain critical issues. For example, the plan indicates that some areas of New Orleans will remain particularly susceptible to storm surge for the indefinite future, but does not respond with comprehensive strategies. In fact, BGR found the plan would actually encourage settlement in high-risk areas through a voluntary, incentive-based, \$1 billion clustering program. The clustering program does not require the voluntary participants to relocate into a lower-risk area. In fact, as worded, it requires them to remain within the high risk and largely abandoned area, albeit in a more sustainable cluster.

Unclear Direction for Rebuilding

The plan contains contradictory information as to what will guide investment decisions. At one point it states that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' forthcoming analysis of future risk should be used to guide "the decision-making process in both the public and private sectors." It then presents a development matrix based on repopulation rates and elevation. The plan does not explain how the Corps of Engineers analysis will interface with the matrix.

Groupings in the matrix do not match the criteria set forth in the text. The text of the plan states that the pace of repopulation in neighborhoods and the "level of flood risk within drainage basins" are the overarching issues that frame future recovery. It identifies rates of population and future flood risk as the distinguishing criteria for recovery planning. The matrix, however, is not based on repopulation and the level of flood risk, but rather on repopulation and natural elevation.

The plan does not provide a map that would help people visualize where the policy areas are and how the plan would apply. BGR understands that planning areas may change over time but believes that including a baseline map based on current data would significantly increase the clarity of the plan.

Even with a map, it would be difficult to determine what neighborhoods should expect in a given time frame. This is because the plan's Summary of Recovery Projects is less than clear in its description of which repairs, upgrades and improvements should be made in different policy areas at different times.

Premature Recommendations

BGR found that the Revised Plan at times makes premature recommendations that need further exploration. These include:

- Calling for governance of the school system to be placed under the control of a single, unified, appointed body.
- Zeroing in on the former Methodist Hospital site as the best way to restore comprehensive medical services to eastern New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish.
- Endorsing the current LSU/Charity/VA proposal.
- Calling for public housing to be at higher densities than federal HOPE VI policies delineate.

BGR believes that these proposals should be replaced with more general recommendations that allow for an appropriate degree of flexibility regarding future decisions.

The Lack of a Realistic Financial Context

The Revised Plan maintains a flaw contained in the previous draft – namely, that it envisions programs and projects in a financial void. The Financial Plan contains a list of programs and projects, estimates of their cost, and a list of possible funding sources. It does not attempt to assess the amount of resources that can reasonably be expected from various sources, nor does it devise a plan for optimal deployment of those limited resources.

Planning without the parameters imposed by a realistic assessment of resources is at best an exercise in visioning. It avoids the unpleasant task of making hard choices that are unavoidable in the context of a realistic financial assessment. It avoids confronting the results that will ensue if adequate resources do not materialize and considering alternative scenarios for the most effective deployment of resources. The hard truth is that government will need to make choices based on limited resources.

Recommendations

At a minimum, revisions to the plan should include the following:

- Revision of the voluntary clustering program to relocate residents into low- or moderate-risk areas
- Clear guidance on how investment of limited resources should be made, whether using the forthcoming Corps of Engineers risk analysis or some other formulation based on risk and repopulation
- A map showing citizens and policymakers where the policies, programs and projects would apply if the plan were in effect today

- Clear and distinct descriptions of how policies, programs and projects would apply in each policy area
- A thorough editing to remove mistakes, ambiguities and contradictory statements
- The replacement of premature proposals with more general recommendations that allow for an appropriate degree of flexibility regarding future decisions
- The creation of criteria for sequencing investments based on hard numbers and realistic financial expectations

As BGR recommended before, it is time for the City Planning Commission to take ownership of the Citywide Plan. BGR believes City Planning should clean it up, ensure it is coherent, clear and usable, and strip out unjustified recommendations before approving it. The City Charter requires the Commission to take an active role in the preparation of post-disaster plans. BGR urges the Commission to adhere to the spirit of that mandate and assume a role of accountability in the completion of the Citywide Plan.

“The UNOP organizers took on a daunting task and have been successful in propelling the recovery planning process forward,” said BGR Vice Chairman Hans B. Jonassen. “The City Planning Commission should now take the helm and ensure that the remaining issues are addressed in the citywide plan.”

The full report may be found at www.bgr.org.

BGR is a private, non-profit, independent research organization dedicated to informed public policy making and the effective use of public resources for the improvement of government in

the New Orleans metropolitan area. For more information call 525-4152 or visit BGR's web site, www.bgr.org.

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