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November 1, 2011

Ms. Yolanda Rodriguez
Director
New Orleans City Planning Commission
1340 Poydras Street, Ste. 900
New Orleans, LA 70112

Re: Draft Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance (August 2011 Draft)

Dear Ms. Rodriguez:

As you know, BGR has followed planning and zoning issues in New Orleans for a number of years, recommending reforms to give the city's master plan the force of law and calling for improvements to the comprehensive zoning ordinance. BGR also released three reports examining drafts of the master plan the city approved last year, and making recommendations for improving that document.

In recent weeks, with the assistance of consultants, BGR has reviewed the draft comprehensive zoning ordinance (Draft CZO) released by the City Planning Commission for public comment. We understand from commission staff that this is the first of three drafts and that there will be future opportunities to submit comments.

We found the Draft CZO difficult to follow, which suggests that the average citizen will find it hard to understand as well. At this time, we are limiting our comments to a few basic suggestions for making the Draft CZO easier to use and understand. We are reserving comment on substantive aspects of the plan until the next draft is released.

The Draft CZO is a complex and nuanced document, and as such it requires a thorough introduction to the public. While there are two brief articles at nolamasterplan.org under the heading "How to Read the Draft CZO," there should be a more substantial, summary document that gives an overview of the document, describes how to use it, and provides context. Among other things, that document should discuss the approach to zoning used in the Draft CZO and how that approach differs from the existing one. It should also discuss the parameters within which the document was drafted (such as the requirements of the city charter and the directives contained in the master plan) and explain how they influenced the Draft CZO. It should do the same for other factors that significantly influence the document.

Citizens who review the Draft CZO will generally be seeking clear answers to four basic questions:

- What can I do now that I couldn't do before?
- What can my neighbors do now that they couldn't do before?
- What can I *no longer* do that I used to be able to do?
- What can my neighbors *no longer* do that they used to be able to do?

To help them answer these questions, the summary document should also explain what the Draft CZO carries forward from the existing zoning ordinance and what it changes. The Planning Commission should supplement the explanations with maps that clearly show where substantive zoning changes would occur. The maps could take the form of an online atlas that uses levels of shading and colored labels to indicate which of the city's parcels are being up-zoned, down-zoned or rezoned from one use category to another. For reference, we have attached a sample of how this might be carried out.

There are also a number of format changes that would improve the Draft CZO. For example, use category names and descriptions are scattered throughout the Definitions section, making comparison difficult. They should be grouped together in a single location. The document would also benefit from extensive use of cross-references, hyperlinked for ease of use online.

It should be noted that, in today's world, the vast majority of users will find this document on the Internet. A user should be able to go online, find the applicable zoning district on a map, and click on the designation to find the district regulations as well as hyperlinks to all other applicable sections. This would transform a long, cumbersome and impersonal document into one that citizens can use to target a specific site for a proposed improvement or project. It would also facilitate development and ease the burden on Planning Commission staff to explain the document.

We hope these observations and recommendations will be of use to the Planning Commission, its staff and its consultants as a second draft of the CZO emerges. We believe that implementing these recommendations would make the document easier for citizens to understand and facilitate public comment. As always, if you have any questions or concerns, you can reach me at 525-4152 x107 or at janethoward@bgr.org.

Sincerely yours,

Janet R. Howard
President & CEO

Enclosure