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BUREAU OF GOVERNMENTAL RESEARCH

938 Lafayette St., Suite 200

New Orleans, LA 70113

Phone 504-525-4152

Fax 504-525-4153

www.bgr.org

BGR MEDIA RELEASE

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Contact: Janet R. Howard, *President & CEO*
(504) 525-4152 x107

BGR Report: Revisions Needed to Make Master Plan an Effective Guide for Future

The Bureau of Governmental Research today releases *In Search of the Master Plan: Making the New Orleans 2030 Draft Plan Work*. In the report, BGR comments on the draft of the New Orleans master plan that is now before the public. The City Planning Commission released the draft in September. It held its first of three public hearings on the draft plan last night. The next hearing will be Friday. The report is available on BGR's web site, www.bgr.org.

In the report, BGR provides an overview of the legal framework for master planning in New Orleans, a discussion of what master plans in general should accomplish, a brief summary of the draft plan's contents, and a discussion of major concerns with the draft plan. The report acknowledges the massive effort of the City Planning Commission, its contractors and the public in drafting the plan in a short timeframe.

Problem Areas

The report addresses major areas of weakness, including the following:

- The draft plan does not provide an effective guide for shaping the future physical presence of the City of New Orleans.
- The draft plan is not user-friendly and, to some extent, not useable.
- The draft plan sets unrealistic goals while avoiding the difficult task of setting priorities. It does not grapple adequately with many of the fundamental challenges the city faces.
- As of the day of the first public hearing, the draft plan lacked key chapters necessary for public appraisal of the document.

The city charter requires that the master plan serve as a 20-year guide for the physical development of the city. As such, it should provide clear policy directives, be arranged in an understandable manner and serve as a credible public policy resource.

Instead, BGR's report finds that the draft plan leaves important matters related to housing, historic preservation, urban design and other issues for another day. At the same time, it finds space to overreach its mission to provide guidance on physical development. In addition, the report finds that the draft plan is confusing, unwieldy and inconsistent. In many cases it is difficult to follow the logic connecting goals to the actions specified for policymakers. Furthermore, the draft plan skates around certain challenges facing the city. It fails to explore the implications of its premises and pronouncements and does not set meaningful priorities.

As of the day of the first public hearing on the draft plan, the document still lacked chapters on community participation and implementation, as well as an appendix – making it difficult for public appraisal. Based on summary information contained in the plan, however, BGR's report expresses concern that the draft plan intends to propose a complicated and top-heavy community participation process – rather than a system that would directly involve neighborhoods in land use decisions and quality of life issues, as required by the city charter.

Recommendations

BGR recommends that the City Planning Commission not adopt the draft plan in its current form, but revise it to make it a clear, focused, coherent and credible guide for the city's physical development over the next 20 years. To that end, BGR strongly urges the Planning Commission to hire an editorial team of highly qualified planning experts to work with the current planning team.

BGR offers the following additional recommendations for revising the plan:

Providing Effective Guidance. To fulfill its purpose and serve as a guide to the future physical development of the city, the master plan should:

- Provide concrete policy guidance for the elements mandated by the charter.
- Fulfill the city charter's mandate to create housing and historic preservation plans that include policy guidance related to the physical growth and development of the city.
- To complement the land use map, provide a map showing which areas of the city are planned for growth and change, and which areas will be conserved as they are.
- Clarify the definitions of the land use map categories.
- Provide a comprehensive treatment of urban design issues.
- Limit the plan's focus to matters involving the physical growth and development of the city.

Making the Plan Useable. To serve as a clear and useable policy guide, the master plan should:

- Organize each element in a consistent, streamlined manner.
- Create a clear hierarchy of goals, policies and actions, with cross-references to the text. Adhere rigidly and consistently to the meaning of the words "goal," "policy" and "action."
- Consistently number goals, policies and actions so they can be easily cross-referenced within and across chapters.

- Significantly trim the background discussions.

Making the Plan a Credible Guide. To ensure its credibility and long-term relevance, the master plan should:

- Employ realistic assumptions about future prospects.
- Establish a realistic timeframe for the recommended actions.
- Set priorities for each element, highlighting which actions are urgently needed, as opposed to desirable.
- Weave overarching areas of concern such as natural hazards, blight remediation and land use throughout the text, using them to inform priorities.
- Provide a short list of the top priorities for the city.

Making Sure the Missing Pieces Fit. To advance the neighborhood participation system envisioned in the city charter, the citizen participation chapter should focus first and foremost on meaningful citizen participation in land use decisions and quality of life issues at the neighborhood level.

The report concludes that with aggressive editing, bold rewriting and fortitude on the policy front, the City Planning Commission can get the master plan on track.

"A tremendous amount of effort has gone into crafting this plan in a short amount of time," said BGR Chairman Hans B. Jonassen. "But for all that effort to mean something, the master plan has to serve as an effective guide for future development. We hope our recommendations will help the City Planning Commission to transform the draft plan into such a guide."

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 525-4152 or visit BGR's web site, www.bgr.org.