

An Overview of Post-Katrina Planning in New Orleans

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ABSTRACT

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29th, 2005, the City of New Orleans was physically and institutionally devastated. Today, more than one year after the storm, the city's population is hovering around half its pre-hurricane level, and a comprehensive planning document that will detail how New Orleans will rebuild has yet to emerge.

Brendan Nee and Jedidiah Horne, two researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, are living in New Orleans and will remain in the city for the fall, 2006 academic semester. The focus of their research is the process by which New Orleans drafts its planning document. The two researchers have been working closely with planning teams involved in the officially sanctioned process, as well as with individual neighborhood associations in two city neighborhoods that are both formally engaging decision makers and undertaking their own, informal steps towards reconstruction.

This paper presents preliminary research results, based on a series of interviews and meetings held between late August and the end of September, 2006. It details some of the circumstances facing the two neighborhoods studied, and describes the planning process in New Orleans to date, focusing on the City Council-backed Lambert Plan, now complete, and the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), which is just getting underway. As of this date, UNOP appears to be the definitive process by which New Orleans will draft a recovery plan. UNOP planners must take pains, however, to avoid the mistakes that have characterized the earlier, failed processes to date.

Background

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29th, 2005, the city of New Orleans was physically and institutionally devastated. Today, more than one year after the storm, the city's population is hovering around half of its pre-hurricane level, and a comprehensive planning document that will detail how New Orleans will rebuild has yet to emerge.

While it is self-evident that the city must have a clear blueprint for its recovery, an additional incentive was added this summer when \$4.2 billion in emergency funding was authorized to complement the \$6.2 billion already allocated to Louisiana in the form of a flexible Community Development Block Grant (CDBG). The state agency overseeing how that money is spent, the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA), has made it clear that New Orleans will not receive its portion of that allocation until it drafts an adequate recovery plan for the entire city. Of the parishes (counties) impacted by Hurricanes Rita and Katrina in 2005, Orleans Parish¹ is the only one yet to have submitted a finalized document to the LRA.

Description of Research

Brendan Nee and Jedidiah Horne, two researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, are currently living in New Orleans and will remain in the city for the entire fall, 2006 academic semester. The primary focus of their research is the process by which New Orleans drafts its recovery plan, a document that will both act as a road map for individual recovery projects and serve to satisfy federal and state requirements for funding. The two researchers have been working closely with planning teams involved in the officially sanctioned process, as well as with individual neighborhood associations in two city neighborhoods that are both formally engaging decision makers and undertaking their own, informal steps towards reconstruction.

Of necessity, their research will be limited to the city of New Orleans itself, and will not address questions of disaster response or preparedness. Ultimately, it will serve as a guide by which future planners and academics can better understand the political and economic context in which recovery planning takes place and avoid some of the missteps and delays that have characterized the process so far.

This paper presents preliminary research results, based on a series of interviews and meetings held between late August and the end of September, 2006. It details some of the circumstances facing the two neighborhoods studied, and reviews the planning

¹ The City of New Orleans and Orleans Parish are co-extensive and, for purposes of this paper, will be referred to interchangeably. Note also that the city's unusual geography necessitates the use of directional terminology not common to most cities. "Lake-side", or towards Lake Pontchartrain, denotes a direction generally north, "river-side", or towards the Mississippi River, is generally south. Unlike the rest of its course, the Mississippi River flows from west to east so "upriver" and "downriver" connote rough west and east directions, respectively.

process in New Orleans to date, focusing on the City Council-backed Lambert Plan, now complete, and the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) just now getting underway.

The Neighborhoods

The two neighborhoods studied, De Saix and Tulane/Gravier, were chosen because they simultaneously confront a broad range of complicated recovery-related issues and because they fall within the same planning district in the Unified New Orleans Plan (see below for more information on how districts were assigned). Both are relatively unknown even to most New Orleanians, and neither has been studied by other researchers to date.

The Tulane/Gravier neighborhood lies on the immediate lake-side of the Central Business District (CBD), and is bounded by Claiborne Avenue, Interstate-10, Broad Street, and Lafitte Street. It is bisected by several major corridors including Canal Street, Tulane Avenue, Orleans Avenue and Galvez Street. The institutional use most commonly associated with the area is a complex of medical and research-related facilities. Despite the fact that many locals commute into Tulane/Gravier to work or drive through it to access the CBD, very few are aware of its residential sections (predominantly on the downriver side of Canal), which were heavily damaged during the storm.

Contained within the neighborhood is New Orleans' only functioning streetcar line, on Canal Street, two defunct but historical breweries, and the aforementioned medical center, which includes the now-closed Charity Hospital facility, the LSU Medical Center, and several smaller institutions. Along the downriver edge of the neighborhood, two large public housing projects, Lafitte and Iberville, create a barrier to the adjacent Treme neighborhood.²

Although the neighborhood was heavily damaged by Katrina and was significantly blighted before the storm, planners who have worked there agree on its regional importance. According to Paul Lambert (hired by the City Council to draft an initial plan for the area), its urban features and proximity to the CBD make Tulane/Gravier “more important from a citywide or regional perspective than most other neighborhoods because of the employment and businesses [contained within].” Sources close to the Unified New Orleans Plan have argued that, in any other city, Tulane/Gravier would be the primary focus of urban redevelopment, given its proximity to downtown and its potential for infill and industrial reuse.

The Tulane/Gravier Planning Council (TGPC) is the major neighborhood voice in the planning process, and it holds weekly meetings at St. Joseph's church on Tulane Avenue. It was created in June, 2006 as an umbrella organization to work with Paul Lambert's team, and consists of three groups: the Tulane Canal Neighborhood Development Corporation (TCNDC), a pre-Katrina neighborhood organization focused on housing issues, the Phoenix of New Orleans (PNOLA), a post-Katrina 501(c)(3) dedicated to

² The fate of these developments has yet to be decided, although it appears likely that Iberville will be at least partially reoccupied and Lafitte demolished.

providing relief and house gutting services within Tulane/Gravier, and a coalition of concerned citizens who had not worked with either group previously. Although TGPC has, thus far, presented a united front in its dealings with the various planning teams that have passed through the neighborhood, PNOLA is seen by some as composed of outsiders (new residents, primarily young and white) who do not understand the issues facing the area, and this tension occasionally flares at the group's meetings.

The De Saix neighborhood is north of the Fair Grounds (a racetrack that is also the site of New Orleans' annual Jazz and Heritage Festival), and is named after a wide but short street bisecting the area. Its boundaries are defined by City Park, the Fair Grounds, Gentilly Boulevard, and I-610. Most New Orleanians know De Saix only as a convenient place to park during festivals, but the area's small residential community is tightly knit and proud of its relative seclusion.

De Saix was built around a 1940's naval base and most of the single-family houses that exist there today were designed to house military support personnel. The LSU School of Dentistry occupies the northwest corner of the neighborhood near I-610, a New Orleans police training facility occupies a parcel along scenic Bayou St. John, and the unsightly, warehouse-lined northern edge of the Fair Grounds is a major blighting influence on the neighborhood. Even prior to Katrina, abandonment of property and vacant lots were major issues, and the Fair Grounds has been actively acquiring properties as they become available. Although the public entrance to the racetrack is on the opposite, river-side of the site, warehouses and housing for itinerant workers are major blighting forces in De Saix and often bring undesirable individuals onto its streets during racing season.

In order to have a voice in the Lambert process and to not be lumped into the better known and more organized Bayou St. John neighborhood on the river-side of the Fair Grounds, the De Saix Area Neighborhood Association (DANA) was created in June, 2006. The De Saix neighborhood did not have any pre-Katrina neighborhood organizations and therefore lacks some of the conflict which characterizes Tulane/Gravier. DANA is led by a board of six people, and meetings are relatively informal gatherings held at neighborhood homes. In a given month, the DANA board meets two or three times, and the full organization meets once.

ESF-14 and Bring New Orleans Back

The recovery planning process in New Orleans can be characterized by four distinct, but not necessarily sequential, efforts. The first two, FEMA's Emergency Support Function #14 (ESF-14) and Mayor Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) committee, are briefly described here, while the others, the City Council-backed Lambert plan and the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), are discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections. As of this date, it appears that UNOP will be the definitive process from which a comprehensive planning document for New Orleans will emerge, but the effort only recently began in earnest and must be understood in the context of the three earlier, failed attempts.

Shortly after Katrina, FEMA invoked the ESF-14, or Long-Term Community Recovery, process. This was the first time the agency had formally undertaken this type of effort.³

FEMA defines the purpose of ESF-14 as “[assisting] state and local governments in defining and addressing their long-term community recovery needs and goals while maximizing the impact and cost-effectiveness of recovery efforts through coordination of federal, state, local, non-profit, academic and private-sector resources.” At its peak, ESF-14 employed 325 staff across Louisiana’s 19 hurricane-affected Parishes. These included permanent FEMA staff, local experts and top consultants who were flown in. ESF-14 sought community participation and held a nation-wide “Louisiana Planning Day” on January 21, 2006, meant to involve Louisiana residents, both already returned and still displaced, in the planning process.

Work on the ESF-14 recovery plan for Orleans Parish continued through the end of April, 2006. The final version of the Orleans Parish ESF-14 plan was released without fanfare or publicity in mid-August, 2006, approximately four months after similar documents were posted for the other hurricane-damaged parishes.⁴

FEMA employees familiar with the Orleans Parish plan indicated that its sudden appearance on the state’s louisianaspeaks.org website was a surprise. To date, the plan prepared for Orleans Parish under ESF-14 has not been incorporated into any other planning processes nor has it been discussed by the major participants in any of the other efforts. According to Broderick Green, who worked on ESF-14, FEMA felt that the results were likely to confuse the situation given the other planning efforts underway, and the document, at least for Orleans Parish, was largely ignored.

The first alternative plan to compete with ESF-14 was Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) committee, announced on September 30, 2005. The team, comprised of attorneys, academics, business people and church leaders, was tasked with overseeing the development of a rebuilding plan for New Orleans and given until the end of the year to complete it.

The gargantuan BNOB planning process was divided into several subcommittees. Widely regarded as the most important, the land-use subcommittee, chaired by developer Joe Canizaro, retained the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to develop a set of recommendations. The ULI released its final report on November 18, 2005. Among other recommendations, it made the politically poisonous suggestion of shrinking the footprint of New Orleans. Population projections showed that New Orleans could not hope to recover its pre-Katrina population for a number of years, and it would be prohibitively expensive to provide city services to far-flung neighborhoods. Thus, the

³ ESF-14 had been used on a trial basis two previous times, in Florida after Hurricane Charley, and in Utica, IL after a tornado in 2004. Neither of these trials dealt with communities that had experienced the scale of the devastation of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

⁴ ESF-14 was considered much more successful elsewhere, and some of the ideas generated are becoming reality throughout the state. At least one parish has adopted the ESF-14 document in its entirety as its new master plan.

ULI recommended that the lowest neighborhoods be converted to green space and presented a series of maps on which parks were shown as covering over certain low-lying neighborhoods.

In an election year, the Mayor wasted no time in publicly denouncing the ULI's proposed smaller city. On November 28, he announced his intention to “rebuild all of New Orleans,” including the heavily flooded neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the BNOB committees continued their work. In December, Canizaro backed away slightly from the ULI recommendations, proposing an immediate moratorium on building permits in the most heavily damaged neighborhoods as well as a three year window for returning residents to prove the “viability” of their neighborhoods, after which properties would be acquired by a newly reinvigorated redevelopment agency. This “viability” window was later shortened to one year and then to four months before the land-use committee released its final report on January 11, 2006. The report recommended a budget of \$12 billion for buyouts of private property and \$3.3 billion for an extensive light rail system. Finally, it proposed that more detailed, neighborhood-based work be done by local architect Ray Manning and the Dean of Tulane University's School of Architecture, Reed Kroloff. This new phase would begin in March, 2006.

Local residents, afraid that their permit requests would be cut off, swamped the city planning office with petitions, and, a few days after the land-use committee's report was issued, Mayor Nagin responded by opposing the proposed moratorium. A series of community meetings was held to discuss the recommendations of the various BNOB subcommittees for the next two months, and on March 20, 2006, the final BNOB report was issued. However, by this time it was clear that FEMA would not fund the estimated \$7.5 million planning process that Manning and Kroloff had been tasked with overseeing. With no funding, BNOB effectively came to a halt, having done significant damage to the public's trust in the planning process and failing to produce a specific list of projects to be funded with CDBG money.

The Lambert Plan

With BNOB drawing increased public skepticism, the City Council announced on April 7th, 2006, that they had hired a team led by Miami-based housing consultant Paul Lambert and Shelia Danzey of New Orleans to draw up plans for 46 Orleans Parish neighborhoods that were significantly flooded by Katrina.⁵ This new process was christened the New Orleans Neighborhoods Rebuilding Plan (NOLANRP), but is commonly given the eponymous title, the “Lambert Plan”. The funding for this process came from \$2.9 million in leftover CDBG funds for an earlier, pre-Katrina project.

⁵ The City Planning Commission officially recognizes 76 independent neighborhoods. Of these, 49 were flooded to a depth of at least two feet, and three of those, Broadmoor, Central City, and BW Cooper, were excluded from the Lambert planning process. The first two are undergoing independent planning efforts and opted out, while the BW Cooper neighborhood exclusively contains a large public housing project and will be planned separately once an agreement is reached with HUD/HANO about planning for these parcels. For more information on each neighborhood, visit the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center at www.gnocdc.org.

Lambert and Danzey assigned teams of architects and planners to multiple neighborhoods using the district boundaries established by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Most districts were assigned a single planning team (the exception being Planning District 4 where neighborhoods were divided between two teams). Hiring decisions were made with little public input, and the neighborhood boundaries used often did not line up with informal boundaries understood by active neighborhood associations, causing public skepticism from the outset. Despite continuing confusion about the process itself and whether it would be considered complete enough to satisfy funding requirements, 46 separate plans were drafted and finalized by September 23, 2006.⁶ The process involved 84 published meetings (including three in Houston, Atlanta, and Baton Rouge) and, according to Lambert, the participation of 7,500 residents city-wide.

One of the most important differences between this new effort and the earlier BNOB process was that planners explicitly avoided a discussion of neighborhood “viability” and, instead, detailed a list of projects suggested by residents under the assumption that the basic form of the city was sound and should be left intact.⁷

While there are arguments on both sides of the issue of the city's “footprint”, the political implication was clear - Lambert wished to avoid the fate of BNOB by deferring the question of who was to return to the city. Another apparently political calculation was the emphasis made on hiring local consultants, including the pairing of Danzey with the Miami based Lambert - a move praised by both Mayor Nagin and Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell during opening comments at the final unveiling of the plans.

The Lambert process, now essentially complete, continues to have supporters who argue that New Orleans cannot wait any longer for federal money and should use the finished plans as a basis for immediate requests for assistance from the LRA. City Council members Cynthia Hedge-Morrell and Cynthia Willard-Lewis, in particular, have made arguments to this effect, rallying New Orleanians to demand their “fair share” of reconstruction funds. It is unclear, however, exactly what pots of money are available and whether the Lambert plans will be considered sufficient to loosen the purse strings at the state or federal levels. In fact, an initial investigation has found the exact opposite to be true: without a plan that covers all of New Orleans (as has been done in every other hurricane-impacted Parish), no money will be released. That said, there has been some discussion among decision makers at the state level to fast-track projects that have broad-based support, and Lambert can claim a small victory in that regard.

On the whole, however, the Lambert planning process was deeply (perhaps fatally) flawed. The City Council and Lambert ignored two basic requirements that have been publicly voiced by the LRA: that the planning process be as apolitical as possible and that

⁶ The exception to this was Tulane/Gravier, for which a plan was not ready by that date. During the formal unveiling of the plans, Lambert publicly apologized for this oversight and is currently working with that neighborhood to complete the process. These plans will soon be posted online at www.nolanrp.com.

⁷ During the final presentation of neighborhood plans on September 23rd, Lambert admitted that the question of “viability” was, in part, the motivation for the planning effort, which would show that all neighborhoods in the city were planning to return. That all neighborhoods were “viable”, however, was a clear assumption made by all planning teams.

the entire city (not just the flooded neighborhoods) be included in the recovery plan. It has also failed to engage the City Planning Commission during the planning process, the body that, presumably, will oversee the implementation of many of the ideas detailed in the final documents. There is also some question about the legality of Lambert's no-bid contract, a point made vociferously by the Bureau of Governmental Research, a local government watchdog group.⁸

Finally, it is unclear how the City Council could have properly overseen the teams' work, particularly given that it was proceeding without any clear direction from the City Planning Commission as to what criteria it would look for in a well-designed plan.

Apart from the statutory and legal requirements that were apparently overlooked, the final plans as unveiled by Lambert are technically flawed and would, in our opinion, likely not be accepted by the LRA even if the two basic requirements listed above were relaxed. The most obvious error was an unwillingness to knit the 46 plans together into one coherent document. This makes planning for city-wide infrastructure virtually impossible. Several individual neighborhood presentations described improvements to public infrastructure such as public transportation and utilities that can only be coordinated at a city-wide scale.

Moreover, those projects that could be completed at a neighborhood level were arbitrarily (if at all) prioritized. Although each neighborhood plan came with a “funding matrix” that divided projects into short-, near-, or long-term categories and detailed costs accordingly, this delineation appeared un-coordinated between teams, resulting in huge discrepancies in the amount of money requested by each neighborhood and the timeframe for delivery. These matrices also included both public and private projects, making unclear what needed to be funded versus what should merely be advocated. This failure is particularly insidious because it adds confusion to the already poorly defined relationship between planning and implementation and gives residents unrealistic expectations about what can be delivered to their neighborhoods. Cost estimates, regardless of their accuracy, have a tendency to become permanent once published, as is the case in Lambert's plans. The final plans are a perplexing bundle of short and long-term public and private projects, the logical result of a process which refuses to appropriately distinguish between planning for trash pickup and planning for light rail.

The emphasis placed on hiring local consultants is often described as a virtue of the plan, and officials, Mayor Nagin in particular, have praised the Lambert team for this effort. Objectively, however, it is hard to imagine that any city has the internal capacity to do work of this scale on its own. As one of the main supporters of local planning efforts, Nagin has been rightly accused of pandering to a proudly insular political base suspicious of outside influence. While a full critique of the plans offered by Lambert is beyond the scope of this paper, the presentations so far have not met professional standards that,

⁸ It remains unclear when, exactly, Lambert was hired. He had been working with the City Council since 2002 on issues related to public housing, and the Council has publicly argued that his new work is merely an extension of his original contract and, therefore, did not require an additional public RFQ.

perhaps, would have been adhered to if the teams had been selected from a nation-wide pool of planners and architects.

Discussions with different neighborhood associations that have worked closely with Lambert have thus far expressed mixed reactions about the experience, largely dependent on the competence of the planners assigned to their respective areas. De Saix residents found the Lambert planning teams to be receptive to neighborhood concerns and feel satisfied and guardedly optimistic about the plan that was developed, but skeptical about its implementation or long-term relevance. Sherry Watters, one of DANA's board members, noted that the most pressing demands in the neighborhood are repaired utilities and properly paved streets, and that the sooner those amenities are restored the better.

Tulane/Gravier, on the other hand, was so upset about the Lambert planning process in their neighborhood that the TGPC sent a formal complaint to Councilwoman Stacey Head stating that Lambert's presentation was “unprofessional and a huge disappointment”. The letter goes on to state that “[Tulane/Gravier] need[s] professional help with planning. So far this hasn't happened.” In part, TGPC felt that their neighborhood was ignored by the planning team assigned to assist it, and that many of the recommendations presented in the final plan were not vetted properly by residents. Although the experience of these two neighborhoods suggests that some good work was done by Lambert, the broader failure of the process is evident: a consistent, unified plan for the entire city was not drafted, and, at least in some neighborhoods, not enough was done to ensure public buy-in for the process.

With the Unified New Orleans Plan now the clear path to releasing money from the LRA, Lambert has apparently assumed a new role as advocate for the rapid delivery of funds to New Orleans, rallying residents to demand an immediate infusion of cash from the powers that be, even before UNOP has a chance to complete. Unofficially, sources close to the UNOP process have called this move “irresponsible” given that the question of what monies are available still remains unclear. One source high in the decision making chain claimed that “if [Lambert] knows of money he can get, [I have told him to] go for it,” suggesting that UNOP fully supports all planning efforts but does not think the work thus far is complete.

UNOP to Date

By the spring of 2006, key stakeholders at the state and local level had begun discussing a fourth planning process designed to avoid the pitfalls of ESF-14, the Mayor's already stymied BNOB, and the Lambert Plan. That effort, soon to be christened the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), was wholeheartedly embraced by the LRA during the summer of 2006 and is, as of this writing, in its early stages of implementation at the city level. Because of UNOP's direct ties to sources of federal money (filtered through the LRA), it appears to be the definitive recovery planning process for New Orleans. Despite some missteps outlined below, UNOP should also be applauded so far for a level of professionalism and political savvy not seen in the three earlier efforts. That said, many

hurdles remain before the UNOP process is completed, and the final story of planning in New Orleans has yet to be written.

UNOP has three crucial elements. First, it is unified, meaning that plans for all of the city's neighborhoods will be included in one final document, a requirement meant to bring some coherence to recovery funding priorities and to put Orleans Parish in line with the other hurricane-damaged Parishes throughout the state. Second, other planning efforts, including both BNOB and Lambert, will be respected, with neighborhoods deciding how to incorporate earlier ideas into the final deliverable. This is a necessary feature of the process for both political and practical reasons – no single process, however well staffed, could plan for an entire city in three months given the limited amount of funding available. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it is being designed and implemented by a non-governmental entity meant to insulate the exercise from the politics that doomed earlier efforts.

The genesis of this new idea came during the final stages of the BNOB committee. When FEMA refused to fund BNOB's neighborhood-level planning effort, Joe Canizaro approached the LRA for \$7.5 million in funding. According to Ben Johnson, president of the Greater New Orleans Foundation (GNOF), Sean Reilly and Walter Isaacson, both board members of the LRA, then approached the Rockefeller Foundation for financial support. Rockefeller agreed to partially fund planning in New Orleans under the condition that the money be given to a local foundation (GNOF), and that the plan cover the entire city. It is unclear what background discussions were held between the LRA, GNOF, and Rockefeller, but these conditions meshed with those of the state-level decision makers. With Rockefeller's initial contribution of \$3.5 million and GNOF contributing an additional \$1 million, BNOB was effectively terminated and the new UNOP process became the state-sanctioned planning process that would finally satisfy federal and state requirements for the release of the CDBG money that New Orleans so desperately needs.⁹ The UNOP decision-making and funding hierarchy is illustrated in Figure 1.

The New Orleans Community Support Foundation, wholly a subsidiary of GNOF, was established as the fiduciary agent overseeing the disbursement of the planning money (expected to total \$7.5 million once fully secured). The CSF hired local planning and architecture firm Concordia Architecture & Planning to staff the process and to put in place an advisory board (the Community Support Organization, or CSO). Initially, UNOP was to draft individual plans for each neighborhood, but, under the advisement of City Planning Commission Director Yolanda Rodriguez, a simpler model was chosen whereby 14 district plans would be produced and then knitted together into one city-wide document. On June 5, 2006 Concordia issued an RFQ for qualified, nationally recognized planning firms, and each district was assigned one planning team from that list. Neighborhood-level planners were also hired to assist where finer-grained detail was required. The local firm of Villavaso and Associates was chosen as the city-wide

⁹ Since its inception, UNOP has attracted an additional \$2 million for a total of \$6.5 million out of a projected \$7.5 million cost. The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund contributed \$1 million on September 15, 2006 and GNOF backed an additional \$1 million in the form of a recoverable grant.

planning team, meant to both issue criteria for drafting the district plans and to produce the single, unified document at the end of the process. The assignment of planning teams was based, at least in part, on the preferences of community residents that were voiced during two city-wide meetings held in early August.¹⁰

Although as of early October, 2006 the process is just getting under way, UNOP aims to have a final document by January 15, 2007 (the date after which the funding expires). The plan must then be endorsed by the City Planning Commission, the City Council, and the Mayor before it is passed on to the LRA.

An (ostensibly) de-politicized and professional planning effort is crucial for two reasons. The first, and most obvious, is that the LRA has effectively required such an effort and is able to decide when and if New Orleans is ready to receive rebuilding money. Second, it has become clear from discussions with nonprofit leaders in the city that the world of private philanthropy has essentially the same criteria before it will release a parallel stream of private funds into the city. Rockefeller, in effect, took a risk by offering the initial grant to UNOP, with the expectation that other national foundations will follow with more support (both for the UNOP process itself and for other, related recovery projects) once the city can prove worthy of further investment. As overseers of the process, Concordia and the CSO/CSF have gone to great pains to avoid the mistakes made by both Lambert and BNOB in this regard, and plan to produce documents that clearly satisfy both formal government requirements as well as informal requirements in place by other sources of money.

While its ties to state-level decision makers are clear, UNOP and Concordia have been somewhat less successful in securing the support of other players at the city level. Although the Mayor, the City Council, and the City Planning Commission verbally agreed to a memorandum of understanding outlining the UNOP process on July 5, 2006, the document was not signed until August 28, 2006, a delay which pushed back the unveiling of the planning teams and other important milestones, undercutting already thin public support for the process.¹¹

Even though the City Council and the Mayor are parties to the MOU, Councilwomen Cynthia Hedge-Morrell and Cynthia Willard-Lewis, two of City Council's seven members, as well as Mayor Nagin have since made statements claiming, effectively, that the Lambert Plan is the final planning document necessary for New Orleans' recovery. This public stance calls into question the depth of their support for UNOP and willingness to convince their constituents to participate in yet another series of public meetings. Another political difficulty is the approval of the recovery plan itself, a multi-

¹⁰ The other criteria used to assign planning teams were the complexity of each district's issues, the extent of damage, and the level of completion of earlier plans.

¹¹ It should also be mentioned that continued delays in the process have confused some of the local planning teams, which are currently operating without contracts and have been forced, effectively, to begin independent outreach efforts in their respective districts without effective citywide guidance. As of late September, it had not yet been made clear the respective roles of the neighborhood- and district-level teams, and UNOP did not hold a citywide orientation until September 28th, fully one month after the process was officially announced.

phase process in which each step creates another potential pitfall and can add a host of unwanted or ineffective pieces to the final document.

It should also be mentioned that there are legitimate concerns to be raised about a process that, in effect, usurps portions of a local government's policy-making role and sovereignty while claiming to be apolitical. In particular, while advocates can make noise about how City Council issues contracts, if the planning process is handed to an unelected foundation (as it was), some of the accountability measures in place, however imperfect, are lost. Neither Lambert nor Concordia were hired through an official RFP process. Whether they should have been is a more difficult question to detangle. A full discussion of this effect, however, is largely the realm of political scientists and is beyond the scope of this paper. It is clear, however, that it is impossible to remove the politics from a process by handing it over to non-governmental actors.

Finally, once approved, pieces of the UNOP document will fall to the City Planning Commission to implement. Unlike its counterparts in most other American cities, the Commission does not have the force of law behind its decisions, meaning that all development and infrastructure proposals are vetted by the notoriously political City Council that has already demonstrated hostility to the UNOP process. Even if its decisions did have legal standing, the City Planning Commission is currently operating with less than half of its pre-storm staff, and is unlikely to serve as an effective advocate for city rebuilding without a major overhaul and infusion of resources.

Paul Lambert himself has fanned the flames of this conflict. In a full page ad published on August 3rd, 2006, he personally blasted UNOP, describing it as a “fledgling” process that would unnecessarily delay funding until the spring of 2007. He also argued that his plans were fully qualified for state and federal funding, contrary to all other indications given by state and local decision makers, and suggested that the UNOP planners would better serve the city by only drafting documents for the un-flooded neighborhoods or for a “recreational lakefront” area. While it was later argued that Lambert's criticism may have loosened some state requirements and allowed decision makers to fast-track projects that are obviously in need of funding, in retrospect this attack seems petty and misinformed.

Given the confusion and exasperation that many residents feel after having gone through two earlier processes with little tangible result, the other difficulty confronting UNOP is one of public relations and outreach, a crucial and under-emphasized piece of the puzzle. So far, the UNOP team has not paid proper attention to this issue or allocated sufficient resources so that its PR team, led by local consultant Peter Mayer, can effectively manage the process.

An illustrative example is the confusion that many residents felt about the way in which planning teams were selected. After a series of two public meetings held in New Orleans' City Park to introduce city residents to the national planning teams that had been

pre-identified through an RFQ process,¹² residents were asked to express their preferences through a survey conducted in person, through the mail, and over the internet. Many neighborhoods expressed confusion about the process, and although all districts ultimately got a planning team from their top two choices, the decisions were made internally by Concordia and necessarily took into account other considerations beyond the individual preferences registered. In this case, it is apparent that these sorts of decisions should not be made purely democratically, but Concordia's mistake was to, in effect, promise more than it could deliver by not clearly describing to the public what was going on.

While falling short of its promises of an “authentically democratic” process, Concordia has, however, been the most transparent effort to date, and should be applauded for making tough decisions when necessary and avoiding the overt politicization of the Lambert Plan and BNOB. Convincing the public that this is the case, however, is much more difficult. In our discussions with residents, reaction to UNOP has run the gamut from resigned optimism (“if they fix the streets we will be happy”) to outright anger about the further delay in releasing CDBG money. The political and administrative delays described above have further exacerbated the problem, and the UNOP teams are in danger of losing the public's trust and sustained interest in the process. Moreover, there has yet to be an effort to explain to neighborhoods what UNOP can and cannot promise, even to those who have been engaged by the public outreach to date. According to Michael Haggarty, a planner with Frederic Schwartz' team assigned to Districts 3 and 4, UNOP cannot draft zoning ordinances, write grants, or issue building permits - all things that people have requested in initial meetings with the team. Once public meetings begin in earnest, neighborhood residents will be forced to confront these realities. One perhaps symbolic failure is the UNOP website, which has not been updated in at least a month and does not yet list the teams assigned to each district. Overall, however, these early missteps stem from the unprecedented scale of the effort and the political mismanagement by other parties that has characterized it to date.

Finally, UNOP has also undertaken a better vetting of the qualifications of its consultants and the members of the CSO board, standing up to the parochialism that prevented Lambert from hiring qualified teams from outside the New Orleans area and that hampered effective oversight of his work.

The Rockefeller foundation has also not been afraid to pull strings to avoid potentially fatal political decisions. One source close to the UNOP process has said that a move to put a local developer and political player from the New Orleans East area on the CSO board was scuttled when the foundation threatened to withdraw its support for UNOP. Joe Canizaro was also explicitly asked not to apply for a position on the board because of his professional and political stake in the process. Another important move was the decision to hire one qualified planning team to oversee the entire process - an element

¹² The New Orleans blogging community, in particular, has complained loudly about these two meetings, charging that they were held in too small a venue and were difficult to digest, and that not enough public notice was given beforehand. Again, this misstep is significant because, at an early stage in its development, UNOP failed to project an image of thoughtful, community-led planning.

missing from the Lambert plans. A crucial role of the city-wide team is the establishment of criteria and boundaries within which the district teams must operate. In practice, this has delayed the district planning efforts, but it is an essential step in realistically prioritizing infrastructure improvements.

Neighborhood-level reaction has been mixed. While Tulane/Gravier is clearly ready to be done with Lambert and anxious to move on to the UNOP process, De Saix residents are concerned about the initial delays experienced. Planning fatigue has set in to some extent in De Saix, but residents agree that as long as the prior work done on the Lambert plan is incorporated, they will proceed with UNOP. Given that pre-Katrina conditions in the area were poor relative to most American cities, De Saix residents' hopes for the end result are modest. Both neighborhoods have complained about the overcrowded and disorganized initial city-wide meetings held in August 2006.

While imperfect, UNOP is, for better or for worse, likely to be the final say in recovery planning in New Orleans. An early estimation suggests that, come January 15th, 2007, New Orleans will be handed a well-constructed planning document that will be useful as neighborhoods continue to recover from Katrina.

Problems Common to All Planning Efforts & Unanswered Questions

It is easy to lose perspective in a city so beset by difficulties that every piece of the picture, from trash collection to pest control, can become the topic of lengthy academic discourse. Taking a step back from the high drama of the planning process, however, should give professional planners a moment of pause. The tenuousness and confusion that characterizes debate about what the city will look like in ten years conceals one undeniable truth: a host of issues largely external to any planning document will ultimately determine whether New Orleans rises from the ashes (or, in this case, the mud) or spirals into economic and physical oblivion. The other question that remains is how these plans, however well articulated, will be implemented or paid for. So far, UNOP has declined to confront this issue and does not see itself as being tasked with doing so.

Of interest to planners is what this grim reality has to say about the relevance of the planning profession, and, in particular, about its ability to confront topics outside a narrow scope of relatively well defined-conditions. What impact, if any, city planning can have on a community as devastated and complicated as New Orleans remains largely unstudied. Although introspection at this point is potentially premature, a nuanced understanding of planning in this larger context is the essential lesson contained in post-Katrina New Orleans. By no means exhaustive, the following list details some of the key components of that context that remain unresolved.

“Jack” vs. the “Donalds” The most talked about boogie-men these days in New Orleans are the two “Donalds” - Donald Duck and Donald Trump. The threat, the argument goes, is that a smaller, more affluent city will fall prey to gentri- or disneyfication, shuttering its doors to low-income residents who wish to return and who, after all, are needed to make its hotel beds. The more ominous and readily apparent specter to

date is that of “Jack” o’Lantern: huge swaths of city where residents return in a gap-toothed and uncoordinated fashion, straining city services and resulting in an untenable urban form similar to the shanty towns that mushroomed around Tokyo after World War II. Of relevance to planners is the fact that, through inaction and willingness to stamp thousands of building permits prematurely, the city government has, so far, abetted this practice, arguably annulling the possibility for effective and comprehensive planning.

A city for whom? Another difficulty that has not been properly addressed by political decision makers is what has been dubbed “the right of return”. Stated quite nakedly, there is no coordinated political effort to incentivize low-income residents to return to a city in which 56 percent of rental units were flooded and in which very few public housing units have re-opened.¹³ Small business owners also often feel excluded from decision making at a neighborhood level, particularly those who have yet been able to return to their homes in the city. Anecdotally, both of these groups feel excluded from the planning process, to say little of the thousands of residents still scattered around the country. Planning in this context clearly means something quite different than planning in a functional, intact city, and it is nearly impossible to account for how hundreds of thousands of individual decisions about if and when to return will impact the ultimate shape of the city, or how planners can possibly account for this uncertainty.

The Road Home. In part, individual decisions about returning will be made in conjunction with the state-wide LRA-led Road Home program, which will consume \$7.5 of the \$10.5 billion in CDBG money currently allocated for hurricane relief in Louisiana¹⁴. The program launched August 22, 2006, and has already begun to dispense payments to homeowners who were not made whole through insurance or by FEMA. Up to \$150,000 (inclusive of FEMA and insurance payments) is available for all insured registrants, depending on their need, and homeowners can choose to use the money for rebuilding or to relocate by selling their homes to the state.¹⁵ In effect, this program is forcing homeowners to play their cards before effective planning can be completed. Left unanswered: How will people decide whether or not to return without a clear idea of what their neighborhoods will look like in the future? What will the state do with the land that it purchases? How can planning even begin without answers to these questions?

The soft bigotry of low expectations. Finally, planners in New Orleans must confront a perhaps idiosyncratic reality of the “City that Care Forgot”. In a locale famously proud of its decadence, residents are anecdotally prepared to return and rebuild if given as little as running water and phone service, and have grown used to the pre-Katrina city which had already failed to properly pave many of its streets or offer basic civic comforts to its

¹³ A small portion of the funding from the Road Home program, discussed below, will be targeted to low-income housing developers, but this infusion only promises to provide a small percentage of the needed units. The exact details of this portion of the Road Home have yet to be released.

¹⁴ It is unclear how the proceeds from sales of properties acquired by the state under the Road Home program will be spent, how much of the allocated \$7.5 billion will actually be used, and whether any excess will be available for other projects.

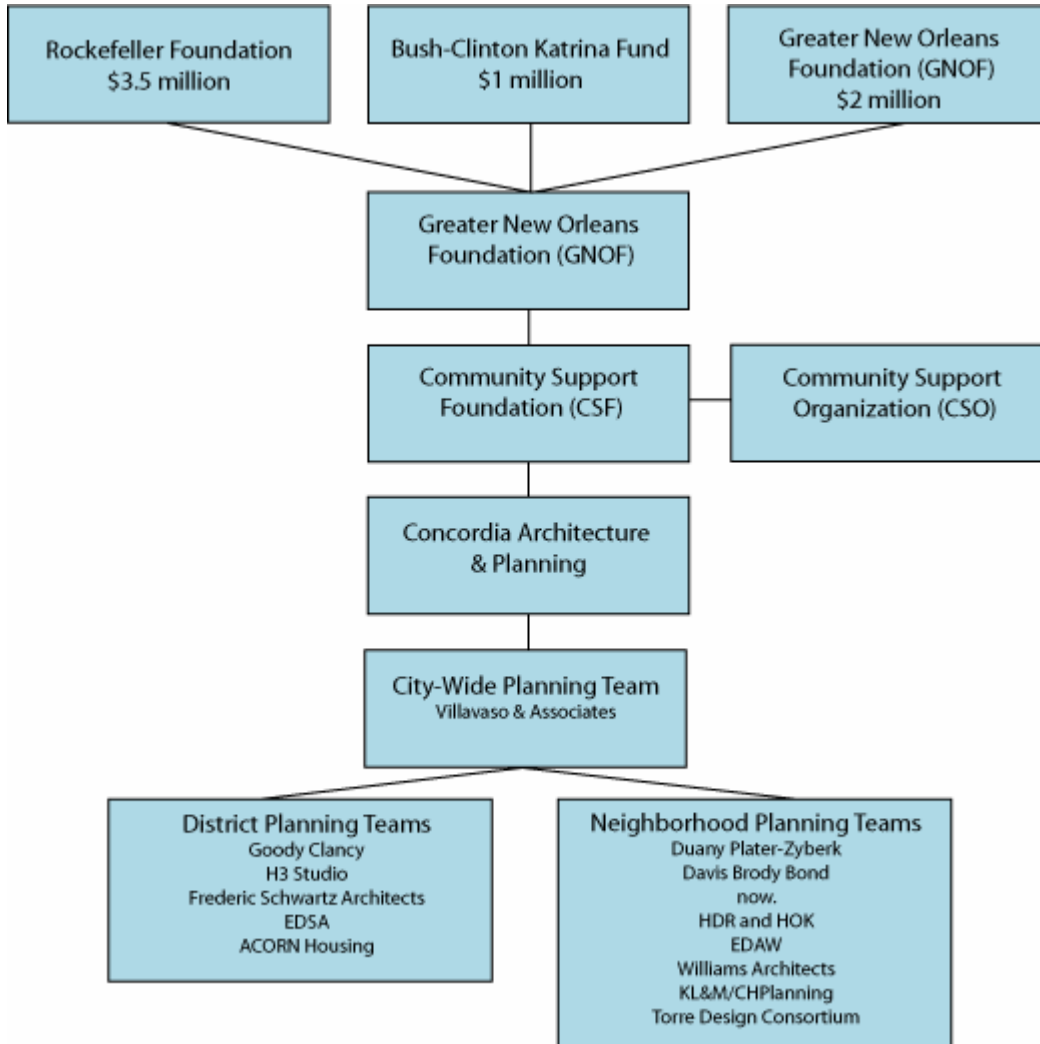
¹⁵ Those that choose to relocate outside of Louisiana incur a 40% penalty. Uninsured property owners incur a 30% penalty.

residents. A planning process seen as offering little more than “dreamscapes” will hardly be taken seriously in a place with little, if any, culture of pro-active civic planning.

So far, UNOP's biggest drawback is its reluctance to offer a systematic program by which the projects recommended and prioritized will be implemented or funded, given that there is no infrastructure in place by which neighborhoods or planning districts can effectively advocate for their needs after January 15, 2007, and that the above concerns have yet to be adequately addressed at any level of government. In fact, our discussions with UNOP officials have confirmed that they consider their work done once the planning document is finalized, and that, moreover, no one knows how much public money will be available for specific projects. On the private-sector side, local planners have made it clear that they are not in the business of grant writing, but it remains to be seen how private money can be effectively leveraged in neighborhoods with little experience seeking outside economic assistance. Despite the very positive involvement of the City Planning Commission up to this point, the question of the local capacity for long-term physical rebuilding is very much still in doubt, and more needs to be done to bolster this piece of political infrastructure.

Key to navigating and counteracting these threats is the continued emergence of a vibrant network of neighborhood associations that has been the most positive development in New Orleans since the storm. These groups have already demonstrated the political savvy necessary to make ties with outside planning firms and national foundations, and to advocate their positions strongly to all levels of government. An umbrella association called the Neighborhoods' Planning Network (NPN) has also emerged, and is becoming a powerful political force in its own right. The heavy lifting of rebuilding will be done both locally and by non-governmental actors, and a progressive, home-grown coalition of activists fully engaged in the planning process is, in many respects, the most important determinant of the city's recovery.

Figure 1: The Unified New Orleans Plan Decision-making and Funding Hierarchy



About the Authors

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