

**Committee for a Better New Orleans/Metropolitan Area Committee  
CBNO/MAC  
Positions on Key Items for 2006 Elections**

**1. Rebuilding New Orleans Neighborhoods**

The most urgent, critical issue facing New Orleans today is how we will rebuild our neighborhoods, including the issue of where we will rebuild and where we will not rebuild.

CBNO/MAC believes that virtually every neighborhood in New Orleans, with the possible exception of any that may demonstrably be unprotectable by even the best of levee systems, deserves to be rebuilt at least in part, in a way that makes it safer and more vital than it was pre-Katrina.

CBNO/MAC further believes that a fair and extraordinarily inclusive process must be developed and implemented for making the decision in each neighborhood of where – and how – to rebuild. An unprecedented effort must be made to include as many residents of each neighborhood in the decision-making process, including residents still living in other cities across the nation. Further, those citizens must be given the information and the tools to plan the rebuilding of their neighborhoods effectively. The *Blueprint for a Better New Orleans* included as a key objective the need to “strengthen the capacity of our citizens to define, develop and maintain attractive and vibrant neighborhoods.” Now more than ever, all New Orleanians must be empowered to be effective advocates for themselves and their neighborhoods.

Given that even the rosiest estimates put the population of New Orleans at no more than 300,000 people by the end of this decade, and that at its peak, New Orleans had a population of approximately 640,000 people, we simply will not be able to rebuild the entire geographic footprint of the city. Furthermore, a considerable number of residents from every neighborhood that had significant flooding (more than two feet of water) are not planning to return to their homes. Therefore, unless the very difficult decisions are made on where to build and not build, every flooded neighborhood – in all likelihood, every flooded block – in the city will be left with a high percentage of abandoned, blighted properties. This will ensure the eventual decay and destruction of those neighborhoods that we are trying to save.

While the rebuilding process begins with the build/no-build decision, residents should also consider how they want the built and non-built areas of their neighborhoods to look once the process is completed. This includes the location of community facilities and resources such as schools, community centers, commercial activity, parks, and other quality of life amenities. Additionally, maximizing the future safety of the neighborhood in terms of flood protection must be included in the decision-making, specifically in the placement and design of any no-build areas. Consideration should be given to converting some of these into parks that will enhance the recreational opportunities for each neighborhood, while constructing them in such a way that enhances flood protection for the neighborhood by the use of a berm and catch basin system (thus compartmentalizing the city, in keeping with the Dutch model, so that if there are future flood events, waters do not rise as high nor spread over such a large swath of the city).

Citizen input should be paramount in making these very, very difficult decisions. However, the decisions are ultimately a matter of citywide safety and quality of life, and the final decision can only be made at the top level of city government.

*CBNO/MAC calls on our city leadership to commit to a fair, inclusive and informed planning process; to implement that process as rapidly as is feasible; to be guided strongly by its results; and to make all the tough decisions that are necessary to the successful rebuilding of our neighborhoods and our city.*

## **2. Addressing the Current Financial Crisis in New Orleans City Government**

The city of New Orleans faces a financial crisis of extreme proportions, unlike anything ever faced by a major city government. Every aspect of the tax base has been severely diminished. The city has no reserves, and in fact is incurring enormous debt. In short, the current situation is completely untenable.

While the present circumstances are primarily the result of Hurricane Katrina, the situation was near-critical prior to the storm. New Orleans has had a deeply flawed and insufficient revenue-generating system for decades. Therefore, while the short-term crisis is enormous and must be addressed immediately, the opportunity exists to make long-term fixes to the system as well.

To quote the *Blueprint for a Better New Orleans*, the city needs “an equitable, growing tax structure that is equitably administered.” This starts with a permanent correction of the property tax situation in New Orleans. Assessments must be kept up to date, using professional assessment standards that are uniformly applied throughout the city. A comprehensive review of properties that are currently tax exempt must be undertaken, especially those owned by nonprofit entities but that are engaged in for-profit activities, and as many properties as reasonably possible must be returned to the tax rolls.

A financial crisis is solved not just by increasing revenues but also by cutting expenses, and New Orleans government must aggressively seek out and implement every legitimate cost-cutting measure it can find. As the *Blueprint* noted, “New Orleans has more branches, agencies and boards than most cities of similar size.” Every opportunity for consolidation, competition for service delivery, and overall efficiency should be reviewed to identify situations where expenses can be reduced while service levels are maintained or even enhanced. Private-public partnerships, managed competition and outright privatization should all be considered wherever they are potentially feasible.

While these measures will have some impact on the short term crisis, they are primarily longer term fixes. To address the immediate crisis, every potential solution must be reviewed comprehensively, including all ramifications and consequences, so that everyone understands those consequences and rational, intelligent decisions can be made.

*CBNO/MAC calls on our city leadership to present detailed, comprehensive plans for resolving both the city’s immediate financial crisis and its long-term financial stability. Such plans should be based on the most conservative estimates of the city’s repopulation and potential for revenue generation under the current systems. Further, plans should include an absolute minimum of borrowing, and should be based on the principle of equitable burden among all sets of taxpayers. Lastly, these plans must be completely realistic, incorporating factors such as the tremendous costs of rebuilding, political realities locally and statewide, major debts such as the firefighters liability, the reduced population, and the overall poor economic condition of the city.*

## **3. Ensuring the Highest Ethical Standards in New Orleans City Government**

A decade has passed since New Orleans voters endorsed the establishment of an Inspector General and an Ethics Commission to ensure that city government performed to the highest of ethical standards. Yet neither of these essential citizen directives has been fulfilled.

In the post-Katrina environment, operating New Orleans city government to the highest ethical standards is more imperative than ever. Maintaining such standards improves government efficiency; it creates confidence in city government that will increase investment in the city from the federal government, state government and private sector; and perhaps most important of all, it regains the trust of New Orleans

citizens. In 2000, the *Blueprint for a Better New Orleans* found “a fundamental disconnect between City government and the people it serves.” To rebuild New Orleans successfully, the people absolutely must trust their government to be their partner, advocate and leader.

*CBNO/MAC calls on our city leadership to establish immediately the office of Inspector General and the Ethics Commission, and to appoint individuals of the highest quality to those positions as rapidly as possible. Appropriate parameters must be set for these entities, especially the Inspector General, to ensure that they serve legitimate, good government purposes and do not in any way become tools for advancing other agendas. Within these parameters, we further call for these entities to be fully empowered to do their appointed tasks, with complete cooperation from all branches of city government and all the funding necessary to be effective.*

#### **4. Ensuring Transparency and Performance in the City Government Contracting Process**

The very first goal stated in the *Blueprint for a Better New Orleans* is “Accountability in government: communication, transparency and credibility.” While this applies across the board, there is no place where it is more critical – or has more impact on the city’s present plight – than in the area of the city government contracting process.

With absolutely no room in the city budget for even the slightest waste, incompetence, inefficiency, or fraud, city government must make sure that it maximizes the value of every single contract it signs. To achieve this critical objective, there must be a clear, transparent, fair, and accessible process for the design, bidding and letting of all city contracts. Further, once contracts are let, there must be an effective and open process for monitoring the performance of each contractor, including explicit timetables and deliverables where appropriate. For service contracts that do not include these types of measures, other legitimate performance measures should be employed, as determined by review of best practices from both the private and public sectors, and with suitable protections for legitimate issues of privacy and competitiveness. In all contracts, there must be specific consequences for any performance failures.

*CBNO/MAC calls on our city leadership to develop strong, fair and transparent processes for the design, bidding, letting and monitoring of all city contracts, and to adhere strictly to these processes for each and every government contract.*

#### **5. Increasing the Capacity and Use of Professional Planning in City Decision-Making**

##### **A. A Well-Designed New Orleans Master Plan Given the Force of Law**

The process of putting together a Master Plan for the city of New Orleans goes back to 1992 and the “New Century New Orleans” initiative. Fourteen years and three administrations later, many important Master Plan elements have not been completed, and only three have been formally adopted. Even such work as has been completed is widely ignored, as it has no particular legal standing or force behind it.

In rebuilding a better New Orleans, and keeping the city strong and vibrant through future generations, the value of professional urban planning cannot be overstated. Citizen and stakeholder input must always be given the lead role in the visions and policies that steer the city’s future direction; planning augments the vision and ensures that it is turned into on-the-ground reality.

Specifically, the value of a strong Master Plan is that it largely removes the ad hoc approach to planning and projects that have unfortunately characterized too many important city decisions. This has created inefficiency, inequity, divisiveness, and distrust, between various segments of the community and between citizens and government. Conversely, a Master Plan creates an agreed-upon framework for

virtually all city decision-making, helping all stakeholders and interests to come together and moving the city forward towards a shared vision of its future.

*CBNO/MAC calls upon our city leadership to commit to the completion of the city's Master Plan, including full review of those elements already developed. We call for a specific timetable under which this will take place, and the commitment of all resources necessary to complete the task on time and to the highest standards. Specifically, this includes providing the City Planning department with the financial and staff resources it needs to perform its many and essential tasks. We call for the implementation of a formal citizen review process to keep the Master Plan updated and current, so that it can reflect changes in circumstances and priorities. Lastly, we call for the Master Plan to be given the full force of law, so that it is the single, clear guiding document for all city planning, project development and decision-making.*

## **B. Apolitical Zoning and Land-Use Decisions**

In an efficient, progressive and well-designed city (and city government), zoning and land-use decisions are primarily made by professional city employees based on established plans and codes. This ensures that such decisions are made equitably and within a framework that promotes such disparate objectives as neighborhood preservation and economic growth. It also minimizes the influence of money and politics on these vital decisions.

The present situation in New Orleans, where every City Planning Commission decision can be brought to the Council on appeal, leads to fragmented and inconsistent decision-making and in fact considerably increases the number of decisions that are appealed. There is an appropriate appeal system already in place, ultimately ending up in the courts, where the laws must be followed and applied and frivolous appeals will seldom be filed. Under the present system, an enormous amount of citizen, staff and elected official time is taken up every month by appeals of matters both major and minute.

The appropriate role of the City Council and other elected officials in zoning and land use is to set overall policy (preferably in accordance with a strong Master Plan). However, the Council simply should not be involved in day-to-day decisions on these matters; nor should it be given the power to review and change these decisions.

*CBNO/MAC calls on our city leaders, most specifically the City Council, to permanently change the present system for reviewing zoning and land-use decisions. This specifically means removing the Council from any role in specific decision-making in these areas – though not eliminating its role as a policy-setting body – as well as any related, reasonable measures that will ensure consistent, fair and professional zoning and land-use decisions that promote the measured growth of the city while protecting neighborhoods and the legitimate interests of individual citizens.*

## **6. Support of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission Recommendations**

The Bring New Orleans Back Commission put in a substantial amount of time and effort to create a short to medium term plan to rebuild our city. Ultimately, most parts of the plan were well-informed by considerable input from citizens and stakeholders. While a plan of this scope and magnitude includes enough details that any reasonable individual can find a number of points of disagreement, CBNO/MAC believes that overall, it is a good body of work and should be a major guiding force for the city for the immediate future.

Furthermore, we do not have the luxury of throwing out many months of work and starting over with a new planning process. Outside funding sources will simply not tolerate it, and the city would literally wither and die should such an effort be made.

In particular, CBNO/MAC finds the BNOBC reports on Education and on Health and Human Services to be strong, thoughtful and on-target. Pre-Katrina, both the education and health care systems in New Orleans were in crisis; both remain so after the storm. Yet in both instances, the present circumstances offer unique opportunities to reconstruct these systems so that they will become major assets to the city instead of major liabilities.

*CBNO/MAC calls on our city leadership to implement the plans and recommendations documented in the BNOBC reports on Education and on Health and Human Services, doing so in concert with recognized leaders and professionals in each respective area and always with an ear to the voices of the citizens and stakeholders. We call on our leaders to commit the resources necessary for the plans' implementation, and to set and follow specific benchmarks and timetables. Further, we call on all involved with the implementation of all aspects of the BNOBC report to establish clear criteria for measuring outcomes, so that all New Orleanians can monitor progress, see real results, and recommend any additions or changes as needed.*