

CABL's Framework for Identifying a Trustworthy Plan for Rebuilding Louisiana and New Orleans: A Status Report

Executive Summary

In the fall of 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, CABL brought together a group of experts from a variety of disciplines to help us create a framework for judging the quality of various rebuilding plans. Our particular focus was on New Orleans.

At the time, it appeared likely that there would be different, competing plans and there should be a tool with sound criteria for how citizens and governmental leaders could judge the quality of those plans. From that thinking, CABL in conjunction with our team of experts developed a series of questions that we thought public officials and citizens could use as a framework for evaluating and assessing competing ideas.

A multitude of competing plans never emerged – nor did a single master plan. Instead, various individual plans were developed for the different areas of recovery. Yet, when pulled together, they can still be seen as parts of what one might consider a “master plan.” The question now, one-year since Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana, is how these



“We’re going to have towns and communities that fail in this rebuilding process, and they’re going to fail because people can’t make those tough decisions.”

- Ben Brown, a planner with the noted Andres Duany planning group (Times-Picayune).

plans measure up against the criteria CABL initially developed back in November.

This Executive Summary provides a brief review of where our planning and progress stand today, based on the criteria in CABL’s framework for rebuilding.

Positive Signs

In reviewing CABL’s framework, it’s clear that at least from a planning standpoint a number of issues have or are in the process of being addressed.

- There are groups connected with the state and working independently to make rational population estimates and projections to facilitate the planning process.
- There is some sense about the level of protection provided by the levees. Strong, Category 5 protection may be years away if it ever happens, but clearly improvements are being made and homeowners have some information to help them make decisions about the level of risk they are willing to take.
- The congressional delegation and the governor are working to secure a stable permanent source of funding to help pay for coastal restoration efforts – though that issue is still far from resolved and the revenues available might not be adequate.
- The Road Home program will provide billions of dollars to help residents from all socio-economic groups rebuild, plus another \$1.5 billion and other incentives to encourage development of rental properties and affordable housing.

- Planning efforts are underway throughout south Louisiana.

Knowing what the “footprint” of New Orleans will be for rebuilding purposes is critical. It’s a tough decision. Will anyone make it, or has it already been made?

- Education in New Orleans clearly faces many difficult challenges, but the state takeover of underperforming schools through the Recovery School District offers real promise of improving educational opportunities for children in the city.
- New Orleans has made tremendous steps toward governmental reorganization through the consolidation of levee boards, assessors, sheriffs and courts – though the assessors and the levee boards consolidation must still be approved by voters.
- And, while health care remains in crisis in New Orleans, there are efforts to relieve some of the most immediate problems and planning is underway for long-term reform, though it’s not clear what that will look like. Either way, Louisiana is positioned with its best – and perhaps last – opportunity to achieve positive, systemic change in the health care system.

Causes for Concern

While all of these are positive developments, it must also be stated that few of them have had a tangible impact on the landscape of New Orleans yet. Many businesses are barely hanging on, homeowners in the most heavily damaged neighborhoods still face an uncertain future, rent has skyrocketed and affordable housing is at a premium. In so many cases, the issues New Orleans faces are difficult and complex, with

no textbook to turn to for answers. Yet in other cases, government and bureaucracy simply haven't moved fast enough. Whatever the reason, major issues remain.

- The planning process in New Orleans is far behind where it should be. Whether because of politics, elections, lack of consensus – it doesn't matter – real neighborhood planning has only recently gotten underway and a final citywide plan isn't expected to be ratified until early 2007. In many cases homeowners will be receiving checks from the Road Home program well before planning has been completed and they have any idea of what their neighborhood might look like.
- It appears no one will know what the "footprint" of New Orleans will look like. Or stated another way, it looks like the footprint will be the same as it was prior to the storm – at least to start with. The question is whether this type of redevelopment is sustainable. The fear is that it won't be and that it will lead to vacant homes, blighted neighborhoods and inadequate infrastructure to meet the needs of returning residents. Perhaps the current planning process will

The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers has declared that the levees damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita are 100% repaired. Yet, flood protection milestones and rebuilding are not really linked in any tangible way. People are already making decisions about where and how to rebuild. As for safety, the Corps of Engineers has said, "It's a risk each individual must decide whether or not to live with," (Washington Post).

ultimately deal with this issue in a way that makes good sense for New Orleans. But citizens need answers soon or they will start moving forward without a plan. That's not a recipe for "smart growth."

- Entergy New Orleans has taken huge financial losses which could lead to significant increases in energy costs for residents and businesses. Will the state or federal government step in to assist the company and, if so, how much will it cost taxpayers? No one knows right now.
- Insurance in New Orleans and other parts of south Louisiana has become difficult to come by and can be extremely expensive. People need insurance to rebuild with confidence, but if the only kind available costs twice as much, returning home becomes less affordable.

This lack of insurance is also pushing more homeowners into the state-sponsored Citizens Property Insurance Corporation, putting the state at risk for greater numbers of policy holders in the most vulnerable areas. Commercial insurance costs and availability is a major issue, and one that has slowed the private sector's redevelopment plans.

- The shortage of affordable housing still remains a serious problem. The Brookings Institution says this shortage has sent rents in the New Orleans area soaring by 39% to an average of \$940 a month. Many owners of large rental properties have delayed their redevelopment plans because of staggering costs and uncertainty about the resolution of various issues.
- Infrastructure continues to be another problem. Electricity is largely restored to homes that want it in New Orleans, but there have been issues with water pressure in some areas because of leaking pipelines as well as problems with water in natural gas lines.

FACT: The Brookings Institution reports that demolitions of severely damaged homes are on the rise in Orleans, Jefferson and Plaquemines Parishes. The number of permits for renovations is also increasing – they now total more than 38,000 since Katrina – and the number of houses on the market for sale is also rising rapidly.

It should be noted that there are no easy solutions to a lot of these issues. Even those that might seem simple

on the surface, all too often turn out to be incredibly complex. And while everyone wants every aspect of recovery to move quickly, there is also a need for thorough planning and strong accountability. This is a process that will take many years.

Finally, as we look forward, we still need to develop a clear vision of how we want to transform all of Louisiana in the aftermath of these storms. Amid all the devastation, something positive emerged early on – a sense of possibility that a catastrophe of unprecedented magnitude might also be a catalyst for positive change. We have seen some of that change – and it's been good – but much of it has also been hard fought. After a long and painful year of expending so much energy simply trying to recover, having to fight so hard

for reform is a discouraging sign for our future.

Now, a year after Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana we must rekindle that sense of possibility that we can do big things. We must refuse to allow the opportunity that was presented to us in such an awful way elude us. Because we have been through so much, we must jump even higher hurdles to make Louisiana competitive in

areas other than rebuilding after a disaster. And we can't do it as a state divided. If we pit one region against another, we will surely fail.

Our task in the year ahead must be to give individuals and businesses compelling reasons to come here, return here and invest here. We can do that by:

- Redesigning our health care system in a way that makes sense for all citizens.
- Doing whatever it takes to give employers the trained workforce they need.
- Staying focused on our long-term goals to improve education at all levels.
- Showing that we will rebuild heavily damaged areas in smart and safer ways.
- Having our political leaders work together despite their differences or past issues.
- And committing to doing meaningful, substantive things to improve our image.

But ultimately, the most compelling reason we could give for investing in our state is to continually demonstrate that Louisiana is changing. We're not backwards. We're progressive. We're looking forward. We embrace reform. Our reputation for corruption is behind us. And we will build a diverse, thriving economy that will create a real return on investment for those who choose to come here, and all who want to stay.