

New Century New Orleans

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A Letter to the Community

On October 17, 1990, the Citizen Advisory Committee held its first meeting to begin the job of crafting a new master plan for the City of New Orleans. Our goal seemed simple—to frame a vision of New Orleans during the next 25 years. Over the next 18 months, we were to hear from dozens of experts and over 400 interested citizens, from every part of the community. For those of us who hadn't known before, it was a lesson in the complexity of running a modern city, and how difficult it is to plan its future.

At the same time, the education we got during those months convinced us that we must try. As citizens, if we don't share our vision—if we don't lift a hand to shape the future of our community, then all we are entitled to expect is more of the same. If we're not satisfied with the status quo, then we have an obligation to figure out what we *do* want, and help craft a plan to get us there. All of us on the Citizen Advisory Committee have embraced that challenge. The result is the *New Century New Orleans* master policy plan: goals, policies and strategies that we believe should become a framework for all subsequent elements of the planning process, including the land use plan and the comprehensive zoning ordinance.

As we learned more about the art and science of urban planning, we also ran into one more unforgiving reality. No matter how clear and appealing our vision of the future may be, without popular and political support even the best plan is just an expensive paperweight. The key to building that support is **active, committed leadership**. If government, business and community leaders champion this vision of the future, the rest of the city will share it. If they support the absolute need to plan for our future, the public will join them. If they hold themselves and their organizations accountable for progress toward these goals, they will ultimately be achieved.

We acknowledge that the issue of leadership may be outside the formal mission of the City Planning Commission, but as members of the Citizen Advisory Committee we feel leadership is vital to the success of our effort. We strongly urge our leaders to make permanent structural changes to the operation of the city, to ensure that all departments and agencies are committed to implementing the city's master plan. Some of these changes should include the following:

- Institute a formal annual review of the master plan and progress toward its implementation, with the results of the review reported to the community.
- Require each city department's or agency's capital and operating budget requests to include a report on its actions toward implementing the policies and strategies contained in the plan.
- Assign responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the plan to the City Planning Commission.
- Strengthen and expand the commitment to community involvement in the planning process, and in monitoring progress toward its implementation.

As members of the Citizen Advisory Committee, we have committed our time and energy to building a plan for the future of our city. We ask city leaders for the same commitment to seeing the process through, to maintaining the momentum and energy built during this community effort, and to building support for the plan's implementation. Only with that commitment and leadership can we realize this vision of New Orleans' future.

Introduction—Urban Planning in New Orleans

Any musician will tell you that good jazz doesn't just happen by accident. Like most kinds of invention, all the building blocks must be in place to make the "improvisation" a success. It takes talented musicians, well-oiled instruments,, and most important, a unity of purpose - a shared vision among the musicians of just where the music is going. In a sense, it is that framework that makes the musicians truly free to improvise.

A city is much the same. Without some master plan, without a common vision of the future, without a framework on which to build - the city and its people can lose their bearings. With a common direction, the people and their government are free to improvise; free to build and create in ways that reflect the common theme. With a plan, the energies and talents of citizens, businesses and government can be brought into harmony, and brought to bear on the problems and opportunities that face us all.

Urban planning is the discipline that cities nationwide use to take control of their destinies, and choose the physical shape of their futures. With community participation, urban planners frame a vision of the future. They then develop the laws and policies that govern a city's physical form--zoning, design guidelines, subdivision regulation, etc.--to bring that vision to reality.

In keeping with this national practice, the New Orleans City Charter defines a specific mission for the City Planning Commission:

Prepare, adopt, amend and modify a long term master plan for the physical development of the city, which shall consist of a statement of development goals, objectives and policies and which shall show the general location, extent and character of streets, bridges, waterways, and other public ways; parks and open spaces; public buildings and structures; public utilities and terminals, whether public or privately owned; public housing, slum clearance, and redevelopment projects and areas; and any other physical public facility, with due regard to the aesthetic characteristics of all public structures.

Prepare, adopt, amend and modify regulations governing the subdivision of land...which shall provide for the proper arrangement of streets and public utilities; open spaces for light, air and recreational areas; space for vehicular parking; the sizes and shapes of lots....

Prepare and recommend to the Council: Plats, together with revisions and amendments thereof, showing the exact location of lines of recommended new, extended, widened or narrowed streets....The Official Map of the City and amendments thereto...{action on} all proposed zoning ordinances and amendments.

The *New Century New Orleans* plan is based on this mission.

A detailed plan for the City's future is too complex to be covered in a single document.

The *New Century New Orleans* plan, therefore, will ultimately consist of several parts, each a plan in itself. The Master Policy Plan will articulate a broad vision for the City as a whole. It will identify the overall approach to the future of New Orleans.

Subsequently, to reflect the mixture of neighborhoods and districts that makes New Orleans unique, the CPC will also undertake plans for many of the City's specialized areas, such as the Riverfront, Tchoupitoulas Corridor, and Algiers/Lower Coast. These special-area plans will be supplemented with detailed planning in some of the more technical disciplines such as transportation and major streets. Major products will include an updated land use plan, and revisions to the city's comprehensive zoning regulations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the New Century New Orleans planning effort is designed to include community involvement at every phase, through citizen committees, workshops and town meetings.

This report is the result of just such an effort. The Citizen Advisory Committee is a group of 30 people drawn from neighborhoods, cultures and professions as diverse as the city itself. Committee members have worked for over a year to frame a broad vision of the City's future. During this time, we have held eleven public meetings to gather community advice, plus numerous additional sessions with technical specialists for specific policy direction. We have translated all of this into preliminary recommendations that the Planning Commission will use to develop the Master Policy Plan and subsequent components.

From our own diverse backgrounds, as well as from the tremendous amount of information given to us by the community, committee members identified a broad range of concerns. We identified issues for the community as a whole that ranged from education and public housing to the environment. But this in turn created a problem.

While all these issues are undeniably critical to the future of New Orleans, the city charter defines the role of the City Planning Commission in very specific terms that do not include involvement in most social issues. The committee felt a need to stay within that defined role, but also wanted to make sure that these critical social concerns were recognized.

Ultimately, the committee reconciled this problem in two ways. First, we specifically outlined five **Community Goals**, that are crucial to the future of the city. Second, the committee members looked for ways to address these social issues *within* the role of the City Planning Commission.

Community Goals

Improved Public Safety

Like many U.S. cities, our community is gripped by the fear of crime. It changes our routines, troubles our sleep and shapes our perceptions of ourselves and our city. It is a daunting obstacle to revitalizing our troubled neighborhoods, and an enormous drain on our public resources. Making the city safe is vital to our survival. Making citizens and

visitors *feel* safe is essential to our redevelopment.

Recently there have been some encouraging signs that the tide is beginning to turn. Police department statistics for 1991 show a decrease in reported rapes, auto thefts and burglaries. At the same time, new leadership and financing for some new equipment have given police some badly needed help. But there is still much more to be done.

Based on our work with the community, and on the Mayor's 1991 Crime Summit, some specific public safety objectives include:

- Improved police response time.
- Stronger ties between police and the neighborhoods they serve.
- Higher police visibility in high-crime areas.
- Equipment and training to allow police to be more effective at night.
- Better preparation for civil disturbances.

While crime-fighting is clearly outside the mission of the City Planning Commission, there are still some ways that sound urban planning can help. We can design public spaces, including streets and rights-of-way, and housing developments so that citizens are less vulnerable to crime. We can encourage growth and economic revitalization of our blighted neighborhoods. We can design ways to provide better access to basic services, so that our community's resources can reach those who truly need them.

Better Funding for Local Government

Even its unique character and charm have not spared New Orleans from the fiscal malaise that is gripping so many large cities. For reasons too complex to count, city after city has seen its most prosperous citizens leave, taking with them their talents, community involvement and, of course, their contribution to tax revenues. This exodus leaves cities in the untenable position of serving a greater proportion of people in need--with fewer dollars to go around. The fiscal problems further stress the city's public and private school systems, and hurt the quality of the city's work force. They also limit the city's ability to maintain its infrastructure, and fuel a cycle of physical decay. The labor and infrastructure problems then become a drag on economic development, and the resulting loss of jobs and income perpetuates the cycle.

In New Orleans, our problem is compounded by an unworkable tax system. Voters trust neither the City nor the State to spend public money wisely, so they tie government's hands with □dedicated revenue measures.□ We have an historic loathing for property taxes that goes back hundreds of years, and a 9% sales tax that affects poor people at a disproportionate rate.

The result is that New Orleans is really without an equitable, reliable source of funding for government. With erratic, substandard funding, many public programs fail. Those that survive often can't be run efficiently, or even predictably. Facilities cannot be

properly maintained, resulting in even higher costs. Clearly, the goals of *New Century New Orleans* cannot be met unless we address this funding problem. Because only a portion of the solutions fall within the purview of the City Planning Commission, our recommendations fall into two distinct groups.

First, in conjunction with the Planning Commission's role in the Capital Budget process, we recommend several changes:

- Increase the opportunities for community involvement in the Capital Improvement program.
- Work with the Chief Administrative Officer to include all major sources of capital funds in the planning process.
- Develop a more effective project tracking system that has regularly scheduled reports which are accessible to the public.
- Change the procedure for submitting and evaluating capital budget requests, to link them more strongly with established public policies, particularly those of the Master Plan.

As this report is being prepared, an internal study of the capital budget process is underway. When completed, that study may offer some additional solutions to the problem.

Second, for those aspects of the problem that fall outside the mission of the City Planning Commission, we recommend the following additional steps:

- Enact a comprehensive tax reform program that considers reducing the homestead exemption and imposing a metropolitan earnings tax.
- Improve public confidence in government's ability to manage, by improving accountability and initiating performance standards.
- Emphasize economic development programs as a way of broadening the city's tax base.
- Support programs that focus on reducing population loss and broadening the tax base.

Improved Public Education

Although public education has been a problem in New Orleans for decades, the continuing fiscal crisis has made a bad situation worse. Where the system was once financially stable, there have been layoffs, program cutbacks, salary freezes, and draconian budgets. These fiscal problems have allowed an already aging system to become decrepit, with students and parents watching quality, affordable education become just a memory.

The decline of public education is contributing to a parallel decline of our city, with

employers complaining about the shortage of well-trained labor, and young people complaining about the shortage of jobs. Every discussion of solutions includes the public school system.

The system faces a daunting challenge. Over half of its schools are more than 50 years old, and less than 5% meet health or safety requirements. Nearly \$500 million in capital improvements is needed to restore aging facilities to even minimum standards. The majority of the students remaining in the school system come from low-income families.

Rebuilding the education system is crucial to the future of the city. At every level -- instructional, fiscal and operational, we must work to improve our schools. The payoff will be in economic growth, reduced cost for social programs, and an overall reduction in crime. Indirectly, the economic growth will improve overall funding for government, and ultimately feed back into the schools. The benefits are unquestionable. The only issue is finding the fiscal and political resources to begin the job.

Some of our recommendations in this area are:

- Rebuild the basic infrastructure of the school system.
- Increase parental and citizen involvement in community schools.
- Rebuild public confidence in the school system management, by increasing accountability and public access.
- Enhance curriculum and instruction to help students compete in a global society.
- Allocate additional funding to the system to help it cope with the changing demands placed upon it.
- Improve student and teacher safety on school campuses.
- Institute a teacher incentive program.

All of these specific initiatives should be closely coordinated with the areas where traditional city planning affects the schools. Land use, zoning and recreation plans should be developed with the public schools in mind. Active and closed school facilities should be put to better use, building on their value as recreational and social centers. The city's master plan and its education system must work hand-in-hand.

Race Relations

One of the unique aspects of New Orleans is the historical diversity of its neighborhoods. Far more than in other large cities, a wide variety of ethnic groups in New Orleans have lived in harmony -- in the same neighborhoods, and often on the same streets. More recently, however, the deterioration of our inner city and a lingering local and national recession have stretched that historic tolerance thin. Both Citizen Advisory Committee members and those who attended public meetings feel that the troubled racial climate must become a major concern. Both on the street and in City Hall, the situation creates suspicion and ill will. It hinders our ability to disagree

productively and can distract us from the true nature of our problems.

Because of New Orleans' long history of diversity and tolerance, we have a better opportunity than most cities to solve this problem. We should call on our city government to lead by example, through its human relations and communications. It can set a high standard in its hiring, appointment and procurement policies. Ultimately, however, the solution lies not in City Hall, but within us as individuals. We urge everyone in the community to set aside prejudices and grievances. We must work together to end the economic and social isolation of *any* New Orleanian. We must work toward a stronger sense of community among all of the people of our city.

Responsible and Informed Citizenry

A final community goal is that of developing involved, well-informed citizens, aware of their own responsibilities in the smooth functioning of a city. In a city where education has taken a back seat for decades, achieving that goal will be no small accomplishment.

In the nation as a whole, public mistrust of government is high. In New Orleans, it is an epidemic. Simple apathy doesn't come close to describing the attitude that people expressed throughout the information gathering process. It's not that citizens don't care about the problems -- they simply have lost faith in the government as a solution. They doubt the integrity, the motivations and the competence of everyone in government, at all levels. Compounding the problem are decades of neglect in public education that have produced a generation of voters ill-equipped to address the problems our city faces.

Curing the ills of our city will require the help of *all* our citizens, both individual and corporate. Convincing them to help will require city government to earn their confidence and commitment, in place of their apathy and mistrust. Citizens must regain their faith in government, and be willing to play an active role in the community. Some specific measures that might help this include:

- Increase the effectiveness of neighborhood organizations, by improving the organizations themselves and by making city government more responsive to them.
- Make citizens more aware of ways in which they can participate in the planning process for major projects.
- Improve the flow of information to the public so that citizens' voices will be better heard.
- Increase both the reality and the perception of accountability in public departments and agencies.
- Ensure that public recommendations play a greater role in the decisions of the City Planning Commission.

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While we have identified these community goals as outside the traditional scope of a city plan, that is not to say that there is nothing we can do to address them. The city's problems will not allow us to settle for a traditional view of the solutions. In housing and zoning we can work to end the social and economic isolation of the poor. In planning the city's basic services and infrastructure, we can focus on delivering services to those whose need is most acute. In planning for recreation, we can recognize its value in fighting delinquency and despair. An important part of our function as a Citizen Advisory Committee is to help the Planning Commission broaden its view of the community and of the mission of urban planning in New Orleans.

Vision

Since it was first settled, "La Nouvelle Orleans" has been a canvas painted by many hands, from many cultures. Native Americans, French, Spanish, African, Caribbean, English and American settlers brushed on the first strokes. Later, Italians, Germans, Irish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cubans, Central Americans and other newcomers added their own contrasts and tones to the New Orleans picture. All in all over twenty ethnic groups have helped shape this mosaic.

Together, these people made New Orleans their home, and ultimately *made* New Orleans. They lived and worked side-by-side, adopting fragments of one-another's culture, while preserving their own. Blending this way they created a city--a home so rich, and yet so genuine. We see it in the architecture, in Monday's red beans and rice, in a king cake, or on a bus destined for "Cemeteries." We see it in the celebrations on All Saints Day, while "making groceries," or inside a neighborhood restaurant.

The *New Century New Orleans* plan is a way to carry on and enhance these contributions, guiding future brushstrokes on the New Orleans canvas. With community advice, the plan can help us preserve the past—the New Orleans that we know and love—while creating a brighter, more progressive future for ourselves and our children.

What does our vision of the future hold? It begins in our neighborhoods, at the heart of New Orleans. We envision a rich, fascinating palette of New Orleans neighborhoods, vibrant and glowing, with many of our neighbors owning their homes. We see a healthy mix of businesses, supported and nurtured by their neighbors and city government. We see old and new residents and businesses working together to preserve their heritage and the architecture of their neighborhoods.

In our vision, the New Orleans has numerous opportunities for recreation and culture. We see playgrounds reclaimed, with programs teaching our children the lessons of teamwork and excellence. We see our culture and heritage celebrated in art and song, teaching the uniquely American, *uniquely New Orleanian* lessons of freedom and diversity. We see NORD and other agencies revitalized, helping our community recapture its position of leadership in urban recreation.

New Orleans in the new century will have a government better able to care for the fabric of the city itself, providing basic services at levels other cities will study and admire. Police, fire and emergency facilities will be strategically located throughout the city, providing swift sure response to calls for help. All of our utilities will support our city's growth while protecting the health and beauty of our fragile environment. Transportation will be quiet and efficient, using the latest technology to move people and goods by water, road, rail and air.

Finally, this vision shows a bright horizon, a community prepared to grow without sacrificing our unique cultural heritage. City leaders will make careful, balanced decisions, managing the physical and economic growth of New Orleans while protecting its mystery and charm. In our vision we see everyone in our community—business

people, government and civic leaders and the citizens themselves—working together and sharing a dream for our future.

Core Goals

This section is the heart of the Citizen Advisory Committee's work. It contains our recommendations for the goals, policies and strategies that must be implemented if our vision is to become reality. It also contains the wealth of ideas -- literally hundreds of them--that were contributed by technical experts, committee members, planning commission staff, and the public throughout the last 18 months, and even earlier, in the Gallier Hall community meetings that took place before this committee was formed.

For the sake of discussion and order, these ideas are grouped around five **Core Goals**:

1. *Vital, Distinctive Neighborhoods*
2. *Well-Managed Physical And Economic Growth*
3. *Efficient, Responsive Basic Services*
4. *A Healthy Natural And Built Environment*
5. *Expanded Arts, Recreational And Cultural Opportunities*

It is important to note that these groupings are for the sake of convenience. It could as easily have been three, or six, or ten core goals. Many of the ideas apply to more than one category, or contribute to more than one goal. Some strategies that support the arts also encourage economic growth. Others that help our ailing neighborhoods will also improve our basic services. The fact that the solutions are complex and intertwined should come as no surprise -- they mirror the problems.

To make the volume of ideas easier to work with, they are organized into three levels:

- **Supporting Goals** - these elaborate on one part of what each core goal is intended to achieve. The supporting goals describe the results rather than the methods needed to achieve them.
- **Policy Priorities** - the general directions for action that we must undertake in order to achieve the supporting goals.
- **Strategies** - the more detailed level of tasks, recommending ways that the policies might be implemented.

In public workshops and technical review sessions certain policies and strategies in each core goal were identified as being particularly important. Those priority items are indicated by an underscore.