

**The
BLACK
C o M M e n t a t o r**
Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

Issue 157 – November 3 2005

*An Open Letter to the Mayor of New Orleans:
Flip the Local Economic Development Script
by Audrey McFarlane
Guest Commentator*

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

Printer Friendly Version



Copyright © 2002 - 2005
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved

Dear Mayor Ray Nagin,

You are in the midst of a daunting task: working to revive a devastated city amidst loss of life, physical destruction and the scattering of your population across the United States. Though the odds of nature, topography and economic reality appear to be against you, the advantage you have is the memory of New Orleans' unique and vibrant culture and the availability of massive federal dollars to support the recovery. The political challenge of the funds will be that the federal government will want to control the process just enough to take the credit if rebuilding succeeds or be able to point the finger of blame at you if the rebuilding fails. You were right, therefore, to get out there quickly and early to set the tone for the process by appointing a working committee to guide the rebuilding. I write to urge that the way the process of rebuilding unfolds will be as important as the result.

Right now your working committee follows the traditional local economic development model – it is privatized, democratically unaccountable and elite-driven. From the outside looking in, it seems that you are overly influenced by the common inner city, urban reality of feeling obligated to always demonstrate a willingness to be business-friendly. Structuring favorable deals and arrangements outside of the view of public scrutiny and accountability appears to be the only way for a city to meet the needs of its most influential constituency, the business community. But you will not have the luxury of a shield from public gaze. The scale of Katrina's televised destruction means that your rebuilding process will possibly be the most watched redevelopment process in history. So, what should you do?

You should follow a principle of inclusion in the planning and decision-making process of all stakeholders in New Orleans – ordinary citizens of a variety of race and socioeconomic status, low and moderate income as well as wealthy. How, you might ask, could you even take the time to consider such a prospect in light of the city's desperate financial situation? Why would you ever want to adopt an approach that will slow down the rebuilding process? When opinions differ, as they inevitably will in an inclusive process, it definitely takes time to resolve the conflicts. A more exclusive, elite driven process would definitely run more quickly,

The Black Commentator – An Open Letter to the Mayor of New Orleans

smoothly and predictably. Yet the result promises to be much better when the future plans for New Orleans reflect the knowledge and expertise of the variety of life styles and culture that go into city living and into what made New Orleans great.

Both Race and Class Matter in Participation

Even though your current board may be racially integrated, it is not integrated by expertise or focus. The presence of black elites on the board does not mean that you have a sufficient diversity of views, focus and expertise represented. What the makeup of the current board really allows is to *pretend* that the interests of citizens of non–elite, moderate and low income are represented. The people who are on the board bring mainly a profit motive and hostility to those who are not affluent to the table. While the profit–motive is an important component, you must have the other half, which is the community component, the variety of people who may not be affluent but will actually be affected by the decisions that are made about where, what or how to rebuild.

Democracy and Meaningful Participation in the Rebuilding

With all that you’ve been through, with much of the city laying in ruins, many will wonder how can there be time for democracy? When we think of democratic participation, we usually think of elections and voting for representatives, but there is another form of democracy that involves the more involved and direct participation most commonly associated with schools and land use issues like zoning and development. These are often legally protected opportunities for citizens to attend hearings, offer testimony or, most applicable here, participate in planning working groups to formulate plans for communities.

I will be honest and admit that having meaningful participation means injecting a decisive voice that will redirect the emphasis away from uses and developments that gentrify neighborhoods and displace poorer, mostly black, residents. Participation will also counter the channeling of city resources disproportionately to the downtown business district to the detriment of black neighborhoods that could also benefit from the infusion of a balanced and fair share of resources. In other words, meaningful participation in the rebuilding means popular participation that ultimately will involve resistance on the part of non–wealthy black people to the marginalization that their concerns and interests usually experience when economic development dominates.

Flipping the Script

Therefore, when the community groups fight their way into your rebuilding planning process, don’t be dismayed. They will flip the local economic development script by shifting the focus and emphasis in ways that will ultimately be good for New Orleans. It will be the antidote to the Disneyfication that will take place from the corporate, cookie–cutter development approaches that are dominating retail and tourism concepts in every city in America. Don’t be blinded by the corporate economic development or jobs rhetoric. Don’t fall for the threats from business interests or developers that they will walk away unless you structure a deal exactly as they like it. With the federal money at the table, they’ll hang around to get their subsidy, their share of the gravy train.

What you and the City will get for this participation is buy–in from the people who see themselves reflected in the process and, even more importantly, you will come out with a more balanced result that will be attractive and beneficial to maintaining community in New Orleans. Ultimately, you stand a good chance to create a model of healthy attractive livable neighborhoods and businesses that will be attractive, not just to entertainment–seeking tourists but, to long–term residents of an important variety of age, wealth and race. And having the community meaningfully participate will shift the focus of rebuilding to ensuring housing, services and amenities necessary for true community. Only in this way will you stand a chance of rebuilding a

The Black Commentator – An Open Letter to the Mayor of New Orleans

viable, balanced and enduring new New Orleans.

Audrey McFarlane teaches law at the University of Baltimore School of Law. She writes on issues of local economic development, eminent domain, gentrification and land use. She can be contacted at amcfarlane@ubalt.edu.