

Livability, Opportunity and Sustainability: A Briefing and Discussion about the Development of a Master Plan for New Orleans

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Greater New Orleans Foundation

Truths We Hold Self Evident:

- 1. New Orleans was not founded and did not grow to greatness by accident.**
- 2. New Orleans faces daunting challenges and exciting opportunities.**
- 3. The future of New Orleans depends on how it manages its challenges and pursues its opportunities.**
- 4. New Orleans can be vibrant, sustainable, and resilient. It can be a city that endures, adapts and thrives.**
- 5. That won't happen by accident.**

The Master Plan and the Creation of a Sustainable New Orleans.

There is nothing new or magic about a master plan. This isn't even the first master plan New Orleans has developed. A master plan is really nothing more than a plan or template for guiding plans and decisions. It isn't a blueprint. It isn't a prediction. It certainly is not a guarantee. A Master Plan is no better and no more effective than the clarity of its purpose, its acceptance by those covered by it, and the degree of the community's commitment to implementing and improving it.

This Master Plan is unlike any ever done in this City or anywhere else in this country. Of necessity it is rooted in the unprecedented challenges this City faces but it is fundamentally based on the strengths, traditions, and opportunities of the City and region.

Sustainability is a function of honest hopes and expectations and the relationship between the economy, culture and ecology. It is not a buzz word. It is not a project. It is not a program. It cannot be presumed. It is an outcome, an outcome that comes from vision, respectful action, and adaptation. In the course of developing this Master Plan it has become clear that New Orleans needs to define what sustainability means for this community. It also has become clear from the many hours of work and discussion and after listening to community input that a sustainable New Orleans at the least:

- Is measured by how we redefine our relationships between neighborhoods and communities.
- Is measured by how we redefine our relationship with the environment.
- Is measured the degree to which the City and its residents are safe and able to remain at home and open for business even in the face of storms, sea level rise, and coastal change.

- Is measured by what we commit to and what we ask of others—individuals, businesses, the state, the nation to do with and for us. (I.e., the City must do what it can and lead when it must).
- Is ultimately measured by the City’s endurance, prosperity and cultural identity.

Achieving “sustainability” in those terms is a key aim of this Master Plan. This Master Plan will be no more valuable and no more effective than we as a community make it. While it will have the force of law that does not mean it is immutable, inflexible or self implementing. It will serve as mandatory touch stone for City planning and actions such as the development of zoning codes, building codes, and economic or redevelopment incentives. It will as serve as a context setting guide for the City in its dealings with other governmental entities beyond the City’s control and that are not bound by the Master Plan.

Sustainability, Resilience and the Environment: A key component of a sustainable New Orleans is its protection from and resilience to environmental hazards. An equally key component of a sustainable New Orleans is a value driven relationship with the environment. For obvious reasons the Master Plan places great emphasis on the City’s relationship with water -- storm protection, preparing for climate change and sea level rise, and coastal conservation and restoration. It should be just as obvious that sustainability is not measured merely in those terms. Indeed, sustainability is not just an environmental issue. It is a cultural issue. It is an economic issue. They are all related. This Master Plan recognizes that.

History and Context:

- New Orleans was founded for vital strategic and commercial purposes. Its proximity to water—the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico are its reasons for being. It has always faced risks from rain, Gulf storms and river flooding.
- New Orleans, like many major port cities, has always been vulnerable to floods, storms, and dynamic water levels.
- New Orleans was not built in a bowl below sea level; it was made into a bowl by drainage and leveeing and much of the city remains above sea level.
- New Orleans grew to be a large and wealthy city without federal levees and hurricane protection. Its river levees were built locally and were intended to make the city enduring and sustainable. Hurricane protection and resilience was achieved primarily by building on high ground, elevating structures, and a buffering coast. New Orleans has always relied on multiple lines of defense to ensure its resilience to water driven risk.
- Hurricane levees were first authorized in 1965 with the aim of providing protection from a once in 200-300 year storm event. Currently the federal government is committed only to providing protection from a once in 100 year event, the minimum standard for eligibility under the national flood insurance program. (The Netherlands, by contrast plan for up to a once in 10,000 year event.) Some parts of the city remain very vulnerable to storm flooding.

- Major coastal restoration efforts were first authorized in 1989.
- The future safety and resilience of the City will turn on “multiple lines of defense”—coastal wetlands and barriers, levees and pumps, internal drainage improvements, and land use planning and regulation.

Obstacles to Protection and Resilience: New Orleans faces significant but not unprecedented challenges to its vitality and sustainability. These include:

- A collapsing coast (more than 2 million acres of coastal land lost since 1930).
- Rising seas and changing climates.
- Inadequate and incomplete hurricane defenses.
- Inadequate and poorly maintained sewerage and drainage systems.
- Homes, businesses, and utilities that are not resilient to wind and water.
- Concerns about the insurability of the region
- The lack of any stated vision of how protected and resilient the City wants to be.
- A fragmented and uncoordinated planning and governing structure.
- The construction of more robust levees and wetlands will likely take a generation or more to implement.

Progress and Opportunities: Work is underway at the governmental and community levels to improve the protection and resilience of the region. Some examples of this are:

- The development by the Army Corps of Engineers of new levee design standards that are intended to improve the reliability of levees, pumps and floodwalls.
- The commitment by the Army Corps of Engineers to provide the City with protection from a once in 100 year storm event by 2011.
- The State has developed a Master Plan for Coastal Restoration and Protection that will guide the State’s efforts to provide higher levels of storm protection and environmental sustainability. Statewide building code adopted.
- \$1.2 billion coastal restoration package authorized by Congress in 2007.
- The State has committed unprecedented levels of funding to coastal protection and restoration and has secured significant commitments for future federal funding (not fully adequate however).
- Deauthorization/closure of the Mississippi Gulf Outlet. Ecosystem restoration/mitigation plans underway.
- Community level planning and organizing is providing a vision of a more resilient and vibrant city.
- Philanthropy and outside expertise (e.g. information exchanges with the Dutch) are helping New Orleans and its communities better understand their options and opportunities as they redefine their relationship with water and water and storm driven risk.

Challenges: The protection and resilience of New Orleans, its citizens and communities must be ultimately be driven by a clear sense of purpose and a combination of projects, programs and actions aimed at achieving that purpose. This will require a combined effort at the Federal, State and local levels. It will also require community and citizen participation. Moving beyond the minimal but essential one-in- 100 year event protection level will require a high degree of commitment, investment and urgency. The technical capacity to make the city more protected and more resilient to water and storm risk currently exists. Creating the capacity to authorize, fund and implement those measures in a purposeful, timely and equitable manner is the overarching challenge. Consider how the following questions might be answered?

- How safe do we want/need our city and neighborhoods to be, particularly in the context of community values we want to retain or enhance?
- How soon do we need to be safer and more resilient to storms and water related risks?
- What actions might be make a significant difference in the level and timing of improved protection and water/storm related resilience?
- Which of those actions could the City, its communities and citizens implement on its own?
- Which of those actions would require State or Federal participation? What would be necessary to gain that participation?

The Master Plan Approach

Guiding Principles:

- The future of New Orleans must be shaped by an honestly optimistic assessment of its risks and opportunities.
- Geography and water shape value and culture as well as drive risk.
- New Orleans cannot survive as a viable community if it must evacuate frequently.
- A 1-in-100 year level is essential but not adequate and is less than the City and the Nation were committed to prior to Hurricane Katrina.
- The levees, pumps, and wetlands the City currently relies on are all we can expect for the foreseeable future. (the State Master Plan and Corps of Engineers plans are not a substitute for effective action at the City |The authorization, funding and construction process for bold and effective action on next generation storm protection, coastal restoration, and climate change will be measured in decades, time the City does not have).
- New Orleans can increase it's near term protection and resilience by how it chooses to live with those levees, pumps and wetlands.
- No part of the City is immune from risk, though risks are not uniform across the City. Plan for water, not against it.
- No part of the City should be left out of its recovery and redevelopment, but the timing and nature of recovery and redevelopment does and will vary.
- It is not possible to immunize the City from risk; we must make it resilient to risk.

- New Orleans can learn from and partner with others (e.g. the Dutch and Federal Government) but cannot expect anyone to establish a vision for its future or be more committed to its protection, survival and prosperity than it is. New Orleans is its own best advocate.

Master Plan- Key Features:

- 1-500 year minimum level of protection from storms.
- A city that does not have to evacuate (except under extraordinary circumstances)
- A City planning for current risks and future risks (specifically those associated with rising seas)
- A City that views water as an asset
- Land use and water management practices that reduce risk, enhance values and increase resilience to water, storms and other environmental hazards.
- Plan for, and to reduce, subsidence at the City level
- Plan for and manage interior hydrology and storm water to reduce flooding risk
- Encourage regional cooperation and planning.
- Support and advocate for improvements to long range storm protection system
- Support and advocate for coastal conservation and restoration at the State and Federal levels
- Support and advocate for effect responses to rising seas and climate change
- Encourage residents to “build smart”
- Harden essential infrastructure against wind and water risk
- Community involvement—shared responsibility, collective benefit.
- Develop “smart evacuation” options. (E.g. evacuate to locations within community when appropriate. Accommodate evacuees when they return.