

City residents denounce “Bring New Orleans Back” rebuilding plan

Remaking New Orleans for the wealthy

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New Orleans residents reacted with anger and defiance Wednesday to a proposed rebuilding plan for the city devastated by Hurricane Katrina more than four months ago. The “Bring New Orleans Back” Commission, created by Mayor Ray Nagin, unveiled the plan at a standing-room-only meeting attended by hundreds of residents. The audience was too large for the meeting room and spilled out into the corridors of the Sheraton Hotel where it was held.

Under the plan, the mostly working class and poor residents of the hardest-hit areas—comprising some two-thirds of the city and including more than half of its homeowners—would not be allowed to move back and begin rebuilding their homes for at least four months. With Nagin’s approval, the moratorium on building permits would begin on January 20. The vast area of the city targeted by the proposal includes major portions of the Gentilly, Mid-City, Lakeview and Lower 9th Ward neighborhoods.

During these four months, residents would have to demonstrate the existence of sufficient “critical mass” in their neighborhoods—by showing, for example, that half of the population planned to return and rebuild. Neighborhoods that failed the test would either be reduced in size or plowed under, and a new city agency—the Crescent City Redevelopment Corporation—would buy out homeowners or seize their property through eminent domain. These areas would be returned to wetlands and green space. The estimated cost would be \$12 billion, which the city would seek to recoup from the federal government.

The plan amounts to a calculated and cruel scheme to permanently depopulate low-income parts of New Orleans and build up more affluent residential areas, as well as the tourist districts. There can be little doubt that wealthy Washington insiders and cronies of local and state politicians will have the option at some point to buy up the vacant land at fire-sale prices and make an eventual killing in the real estate market.

As for the tens of thousands of working class New Orleans residents stripped of their homes and jobs and scattered across the country as a result of the government’s incompetence in the Katrina disaster, they will be left to their own devices. This is

the outcome of President Bush’s televised pledge, some four months ago, to rebuild the city “higher and better.”

The role of Nagin, a former Cox Communications executive and a Democrat, underscores the agreement of the Democratic and Republican parties to tailor the rebuilding effort to the wealthy and essentially abandon the working class victims of the hurricane.

“I don’t think it’s right that you take our properties. Over my dead body,” called out Lower 9th Ward resident Caroline Parker during Wednesday’s commission hearing. “Like I said, I didn’t die with Katrina.”

Much of the residents’ anger was aimed at the commission members—in particular, wealthy New Orleans developer Joseph C. Canizaro, a close associate of Bush and key architect of the plan.

Harvey Bender, a laid-off city maintenance worker from New Orleans East, lashed out at the assembled commission members. “How many people from my back yard are up there?” he said. “I’m ready to rebuild and I’m not letting you take mine. I’m going to fight, whatever it takes, to rebuild my property.... I’m going to suit up like I’m going to Iraq and fight this.”

Robyn Braggs, also from New Orleans East, pointed out that many former residents are still scattered around the country. “I don’t think four or five months is close to enough time given all we would need to do,” she said. Families with school-age children, she added, “won’t be able to even return to do the work necessary until this summer.”

Nagin’s comments did little to calm tensions in the hall. “None of us want to be in this particular place, but Katrina has forced us to take a good, hard look at what we need to do to rebuild our city,” he said. “The realities are that we will have limited resources to redevelop our city.”

A visit to New Orleans the following day by George Bush underscored his administration’s opposition to boosting these limited resources. The president’s demeanor and comments revealed his personal contempt and indifference toward the suffering of the city’s poorest residents in the wake of the Katrina catastrophe.

In his first visit since October, Bush took a 10-minute motorcade ride from Louis Armstrong International Airport to a closed-door meeting with business leaders and elected officials in the Lower Garden District, an area showing no signs of hurricane damage. He did not speak before the general public or take any questions.

Nor did he venture into any of the worst-hit neighborhoods. He bypassed Jackson Square, where several hundred girls from the Academy of the Sacred Heart were staging a protest demanding stronger levees. This was the site of Bush's September 15 televised address on the Katrina disaster.

In brief remarks for the television cameras following his meeting with the city's business elite, Bush ignored the large parts of the city still devastated and littered with the rubble of broken homes. He gushed, "It may be hard for you to see, but from when I first came here to today, New Orleans is reminding me of the city I used to visit."

He added, "It's a heck of a place to bring your family. It's a great place to find some of the greatest food in the world and some wonderful fun. And I'm glad you got your infrastructure back on its feet."

Such ignorant and callous stupidity speaks for itself.

Bush dodged questions about rebuilding the city's levee system to withstand a category 4 or 5 hurricane. (Katrina, a slow-moving category 3 storm, swamped the levee system. The New Orleans levees were generally believed to be able to protect against flooding of a fast-moving category 3 storm.) He commented only that the city needed storm protection "stronger and better than the previous system." In fact, there are no plans to strengthen the levees to withstand a new Katrina-strength storm.

He touted his administration's support for spending \$3.1 billion in federal funds to repair and reinforce the levees. But experts estimate that it would cost over \$32 billion—or more than 10 times what the government intends to spend—to improve the city's levees, drainage canals and pumps to provide category 5 protection.

Of the 462,000 people who lived in New Orleans prior to Katrina, only about 144,000—or less than a third—presently reside in the city. Those areas that have come back to life include the French Quarter and the city's upscale sectors. Neighborhoods like the Lower 9th Ward remain covered in millions of pounds of toxic debris. Affluent city residents and tourists are the ones who will share, in the upcoming Carnival season, in the "greatest food" and "wonderful fun" touted by Bush.

Only a last-minute district court ruling forced the Federal Emergency Management Agency to allow Katrina evacuees to stay in New Orleans-area hotels until the day after Mardi Gras (February 28) if they have nowhere else to go.

Hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast residents remain homeless: 672,000 evacuees are still receiving rental assistance from FEMA and about 80,000 households are living in

temporary quarters.

The cornerstone of Bush's plan for the Gulf Coast is the Gulf Opportunity Zone Act of 2005, which he signed into law last month. Based on the bromide that free enterprise and the "magic of the market" are the key to recovery, the law provides tax relief for businesses affected by Katrina. Congress has enacted \$8 billion worth of business tax relief for the region.

To date, the government has spent a total of \$25 billion on relief efforts for Hurricane Katrina, the worst natural disaster to strike the United States in modern history. To put this figure into perspective, it is estimated that more than \$250 billion—or ten times this amount—has already been spent on the war in Iraq. A recent study by two leading economists projects that the war will ultimately cost \$1 trillion to \$2 trillion.

A recent column in the *Wall Street Journal* by James K. Glassman provides one of the more blunt appraisals of the situation in New Orleans from the standpoint of the ruling elite. In his opinion, the catastrophe was not the result of a natural disaster compounded by gross government negligence and a colossal misallocation of resources away from social needs and infrastructure and into the private bank accounts of the rich and the super-rich, but rather the heavy hand of government on "free enterprise" and the capitalist market.

He writes that the marshlands should never have been drained in the early 1900s, and homes in those areas should never have been built.

Glassman argues: "It was planning—specifically, the horrifying housing projects, largely destroyed in Katrina; the stultifying school system; the Superdome and other wasteful public-works projects—that held the city back." He concludes with the twisted notion that the aftermath of the Katrina tragedy "presents the most exciting urban opportunity since San Francisco in 1906."

In modern mass society, only a nationally and internationally organized and coordinated response, based on meticulous planning and driven by the common good, rather than private gain, can respond to the needs of communities stricken by a disaster of the magnitude of Katrina. At a minimum, the necessary financial resources would have to be allocated to provide jobs and emergency assistance, enable the victims to rebuild their homes, and restore the social infrastructure of schools, hospitals and cultural institutions.

The response of the Bush administration, Congress and local officials to Katrina demonstrates not only that the existing two-party system has no interest in mounting such an effort, but that the capitalist profit system which both parties defend makes such an undertaking impossible.



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