



Los Angeles Times | Opinion

You are here: [LAT Home](#) > [Articles](#) > [2006](#) > [August](#) > [20](#) > [Opinion](#)

Archive for Sunday, August 20, 2006

The new New Orleans

August 20, 2006 *in print edition M-4*

IT HAS BEEN ALMOST A YEAR SINCE one of the most destructive natural disasters in U.S. history forever altered one of the nation's most historic cities. New Orleans has yet to recover from Hurricane Katrina, and probably won't until the fifth or 10th or 20th anniversary. And it is the city's leaders, more than state or federal officials, who will bear the responsibility for New Orleans' renewal – or lack thereof.

Unfortunately for the residents of the Big Easy, those leaders failed them repeatedly. But as the first anniversary of the hurricane approaches, it's not too late for the area to turn itself around. The key will be whether Mayor C. Ray Nagin and the City Council stop hoping for a solution to rise naturally from the scattered population and start making some tough decisions themselves.

The bumbling by local, state and federal officials during the initial days of the storm has been well documented. More than 1,000 people died in Louisiana, many of them senior citizens and hospital patients who couldn't get out of Katrina's way. Local officials made baffling errors in implementing their hurricane-response plans, and the belated arrival of the federal cavalry showed this country at its worst.

It will take years for the ruined communities on the Gulf Coast to rebuild. More than 200,000 dwellings were destroyed in Louisiana alone, along with \$10 billion worth of roads, sewer systems and other public facilities. So it's not surprising that the hardest-hit areas in and around New Orleans still look like rubble-strewn ghost towns. But it's critical for the city to chart the path now to a future New Orleans that works better than it did before the storms.

And that's where city leaders have performed the worst. Tied in knots by racial and class divisions, they have given storm-battered homeowners and landlords little guidance on whether and how their neighborhoods would be rebuilt. While surrounding areas were developing their reconstruction plans, New Orleans' leaders ignored or rejected the work of two blue-ribbon planning groups. Eventually, separate planning efforts emerged – one funded by the council through a no-bid contract, the other by the Rockefeller Foundation and backed by the state disaster-recovery agency. Those efforts are now being reconciled, but the city's rebuilding road map won't be finished until at least year's end.

Granted, the state and federal governments will still play crucial roles in the rebirth of New Orleans. Armed with \$7.5 billion in federal grants, the state is about to start writing checks for up to \$150,000 to homeowners whose houses were destroyed. These amounts should cover the bulk of the uninsured losses in Louisiana.

The Army Corps of Engineers has plugged the breaches in the levees, although it may take four more years to fix the design and construction flaws that led to the failures.

But the fate of New Orleans lies mostly in local hands. There are some hopeful signs: The storm accelerated the transformation of the city's public schools; of the 56 that will be open for the 2006-07 school year, all but five are charter schools or under state supervision. And voters will have the chance this fall to eliminate two political fiefdoms that have hindered disaster prevention and recovery: the multiple levee boards and local assessors.

It's some consolation that New Orleans' leaders haven't moved the city in the wrong direction. They just haven't moved it in any direction. With grants starting to flow and repairs soon to begin, residents and businesses are starting to make critical decisions about where they will invest in New Orleans, if at all. The city needs to write its road map to a better New Orleans before the route back to the previous version is set in concrete.

More articles from the Opinion section

California and the world. Get the Times from \$1.35 a week

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times