

Thursday, August 31st, 2006
New Orleans, Louisiana

IT'S ALL ABOUT EXPECTATIONS

We've heard the message over and over again for months. The whole Katrina recovery effort will take time. There are checks and balances we must build in, but with a great deal of effort, we hopefully will soon get back to our pre-Katrina life. Just hang in there with us, say our public officials, and by hook or crook, we'll get back to the status quo.

Here's the question. Is merely reaching for the status quo enough? Have our public officials, from the Governor on down, been successful in pounding home little more than a clean up, so that that they have succeeded in moderating our expectations?

Take a look at the rebuilding plan, or the lack thereof in New Orleans. Here is a chance for New Orleans to transform whether than to merely rebuild. My old friend David Voelker, a member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, sums it up about as well as could be said: "My fear is the city is coming up with a plan that is all repair, with no dreams for the future." What Voelker is saying is that it looks like New Orleans is trying to "bounce back" rather than "bounce forward." Don't be creative. Just put things back as they were.

Shortly after the storm, several urban planning groups were brought in to New Orleans to draw up visions for the city's future. And there was a lot to transform. Remember that New Orleans was a decaying city for many decades way before the storm hit.

What a great opportunity to use the billions of dollars at hand. Remember, there is presently some \$7 billion in federal funds just waiting for New Orleans to come up with a plan to spend it. This is in addition to the \$7 billion in grants to homeowners that are just beginning to become available.

Some really interesting ideas were put forth. New Orleans has always been short of green space. What an opportunity to lay out new parks with lots of open space, incorporating bike paths and pedestrian walkways. Add more streetcars to continue the ambience of those that were in place, and the blending of some retail and residential areas where people can walk for most of their needs.

There were several major plans put on the table. With the population only half its pre-Katrina size, there is no way to provide their public services for the entire city. It's logical that some areas just should not be rebuilt.

That's when the human cries started. Everyone, for understandable reasons, wanted it like it was. But it's never going to be "like it was," and that's where political leadership comes in. The

Mayor of New Orleans, who seems to pick a fight with some group almost weekly, has punted any opportunity to put into place a creative vision of his city's future.

From all indications, there is a cross section of decent hardworking citizens trying to find a consensus towards a more progressive rebuilding plan. A number of local neighborhood associations are trying their best to consider the big picture. But little support is coming from City Hall.

Here's the bottom line. Yes rebuilding is taking place. But it's in many of the same flood-prone areas that no doubt will flood again.

There is a slow, muddling, sloppy recovery going on. Without the Mayor and other city officials stepping up with a master plan for the city's future, expectations will stay low, the status quo will continue, and the once Queen City of the South will limp along as another mediocre detour off of I-10.

The same thing can be said about actions in Baton Rouge, particularly summing up the most recent legislative session. Oh there was talk about reform. A few voices were heard pointing out what could be some major opportunities for change aided by Katrina's fallout, and putting to use for rebuilding the massive federal dollars to be spent. But when all was said and done, expectations were moderated, a lot of pork was thrown around, and the status quo held fast.

After months of waiting on the Mayor to offer leadership in pushing a united plan, the New Orleans City Council tried coming up with its own plan. Then an announcement was made that another panel was appointed to develop additional rebuilding plans. Tulane University's Dean of Architecture summed up the scatter chatter approach pretty well: "It was just the perfect storm of bad policy," said Dr. Reed Kroloff. "If you wanted to kill a city, this was the way to do it."

The lack of any serious planning is reflected in the downtown image on display to anyone who seeks to drive down Canal Boulevard. Remember now, this is the widest Boulevard in America, built to reflect the grandest of the Champs Elysees. Even along New Orleans' "showplace street," there are piles of trash and boarded up buildings. Street lights are out and bent signs are still visible. If you are trying to lure tourists back to the main boulevard, it seems like a strange way to proceed.

It's a fact of life that our expectations have never been all that high here in Louisiana. We get what we expect, and on the track we're heading now, it will take a number of years before we even come close to reaching that minor benchmark we call the status quo. But you have to wonder; where's the political will? Like Peggy Lee sang some years ago: "Is that all there is?"

*"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking
we used when we created them."*

--Albert Einstein

Peace and justice.

Jim Brown

You can listen to Jim Brown all this week as host on Talk Radio, 1380 AM in Baton Rouge and on the web at www.Talk1380.com from 9:00 am until 11:00 am each weekday. Next week, catch Jim on 1380 AM in Baton Rouge each morning, same time.

Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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