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news

Henry Calls for Commitment, Coordination, and Cooperation at Rebuilding Conference in New Orleans

By Mark Fitzgerald

Responding to calls by Louisiana's governor, Kathleen Blanco, and the Louisiana Recovery Authority (a planning and coordinating body), more than 650 people—including public officials, local residents, community leaders, architects, engineers, planners, and other professionals—gathered in New Orleans for the Louisiana Recovery and Rebuilding Conference, which was held at the JW Marriott Hotel, on Canal Street, November 10–12. ASCE, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the American Institute of Architects, and the American Planning Association sponsored the conference, which sought to define the planning principles that will guide long-range recovery efforts in Louisiana.

“The Louisiana Recovery Authority and I asked for this conference on short notice and now it's been made a reality,” said Blanco in a keynote address on November 10. “This is a perfect example of public-private collaboration, of bringing people together to solve problems, of civic action in support of the common good. I am happy to see so many Louisianians taking a lead.”

Blanco, who has been working to reduce state taxes and spending, emphasized the need for local stakeholders to uphold the region's cultural identity and history. “Each of the other cities, towns, and communities devastated by Katrina and Rita has its own unique culture and flavor,” she said. “No rebuilding or recovery will succeed without keeping those cultures in the forefront. We must rebuild in a way that retains the heart and soul of this vibrant and unique city and region. We must keep that spirit alive to

attract our families and businesses back to New Orleans and every other community in south Louisiana damaged by the hurricanes.”

The governor went on to say that she had recently recommended state legislation that she hoped would put in place a comprehensive system of robust and reliable building codes. “I’ve asked the legislature to adopt a statewide building code and a unified, coordinated, and focused plan for hurricane protection and coastal restoration,” Blanco noted. “Louisiana has never had a statewide building code, although some of our parishes have had solid building codes for years. I’m hopeful that . . . we will have a minimum code that will encourage and allow local authorities, especially those in the coastal zone, to create even stronger codes. The single most important issue in Louisiana today is coastal protection: raising the levees to withstand a category five hurricane and restoring our coastal wetlands. I am proposing a unified coastal protection authority to coordinate and oversee the myriad local, state, and regional agencies involved in these efforts.”

After acknowledging that more than 80,000 businesses in Louisiana had been destroyed by Katrina and Rita, Blanco stressed the importance of smart investment and strategic rebuilding. “Louisiana will engage in sound fiscal practices,” she promised. “We will make wise choices as we rebuild. I know that you—the designers, the planners, the innovators—will give us many choices for this recovery and that you will help us make the wise choices.”

Later that morning William P. Henry, P.E., F.ASCE, who in October completed his term as the Society’s president, spoke about implementing a recovery plan for the region’s infrastructure systems that would embrace the principles of sustainable development. (According to ASCE’s Policy 418, which was adopted by the Board of Direction on October 19, 2004, sustainable development is “the challenge of meeting human needs for natural resources, industrial products, energy, food, transportation, shelter, and effective waste management while conserving and protecting environmental quality and the natural resource base essential for future development.”)

Henry called upon the engineering and construction community to embrace this challenge and adopt a comprehensive approach to infrastructure rebuilding. “In the hurricanes’ aftermath, there has been lots of talk about repairing and rebuilding the levees and improving flood control but very little mention of that rebuilding effort’s effect on other infrastructure systems,” he pointed out. “Recovery efforts must not be looked at on a project-by-project basis, but in a more all-encompassing approach that factors in the system interdependencies and works to mitigate the impact that one system’s failure would have on the others—such as an electrical failure compromising a pump station’s ability to move storm water.”

A project’s life-cycle cost and the effect that an infrastructure system has on the environment, Henry contended, should be cardinal factors in the reconstruction effort. In closing, he recognized the importance of collaboration between the public and private sectors and the need for open dialogue between planners and local citizens. “Any

progress made will require commitment, coordination, and cooperation from all levels of government—federal, state, and local—as well as [from] the private sector and individual citizens,” he said. “The choices and decisions we make will affect the health, safety, and prosperity of every citizen in the region. If anything positive can come from this horrible tragedy, let us use the region’s reconstruction as an example for the nation that our patch and pray mentality about our own infrastructure is no longer sufficient. Consideration of sustainable development, environmental and economic impacts and potential, and the integration of new and innovative technologies can all serve as the crucial first principles in rebuilding this great region’s infrastructure to a level where it can support a vital and thriving economy.”

The conference featured speeches and presentations by many other leaders and professionals, among them Thomas L. Jackson, P.E., F.ASCE, a former ASCE president and a vice president of DMJM Harris; Robert B. Flowers, P.E., M.ASCE, the chief executive officer of HNTB Federal Services Corporation and a former head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and Richard Moe, the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In addressing the conference, these leaders drew on their vast experience in such areas as planning, engineering, architecture, and construction.

The conference generated a number of policy goals and planning principles that everyone agreed should inform the recovery and rebuilding of Louisiana. The goals include creating infrastructure that supports recovery by restoring confidence, enhancing the quality of life, and offering the ability to withstand future disasters. Those in attendance agreed that economic growth should be for the benefit of everyone and that public services in the future would have to meet a higher standard. Other goals include planning and designing livable communities and pursuing policies that promote a healthy environment and healthy people.