OP-ED: A city adrift

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By Stephanie Grace

It's become a familiar refrain over the last 10 months: There will be clarity. Just wait.

Wait for the federal flood maps to come out.

Wait for Congress to approve that second round of Community Development Block Grants.

Wait for HUD to decide how to rebuild public housing.

Wait for voters to elect a mayor and City Council to oversee the rebuilding of New Orleans during this critical stage.

And, of course, wait for the neighborhood planning process to happen.

Well, we waited. So where's that clarity?

OK, yes, it's all complicated.
But by now, we really should have moved out of the starting gate. Instead, it seems we're treading on the same old ground.

FEMA's initial flood advisory, released last spring, was supposed to settle confusion over the elevation requirements of new construction and major renovations. Now comes word that the Nagin administration is balking at adopting the requirements.

City officials' questions are reasonable ones. If a building isn't in a zone where flood insurance is required in the first place, city officials wonder, does it make sense to require blighted but unflooded properties in need of renovation to be raised?

On the other hand, the simple fact that areas west of the Industrial Canal flooded due to levee failure isn't a convincing argument against any new elevation requirements.

But uncertainties over the flood maps are nothing compared to confusion over the neighborhood planning process, which hasn't even gotten started yet. Or maybe it has. Depends on whom you ask, and how they define the task at hand.

Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back commission's four-month process for
all parts of the city wasn't funded, so it never happened.

Into the vacuum stepped the City Council, which hired its own consultants to meet with residents of badly flooded areas, plus a bunch of active civic associations that tapped into professional volunteer help.

The upshot is that some neighborhoods are moving right along and some have barely started, but nobody knows how their piece might be melded into a cohesive citywide plan.

In the meantime, Nagin, City Council members, the Greater New Orleans Foundation and the Louisiana Recovery Authority are busy negotiating how to bring all the activity under a new initiative backed by a $3.5 million grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Turns out a sticking point is concern among some council members that their process will be taken over by the broader effort. Gee, who could have envisioned that?

And even assuming an agreement is reached, there are still huge unknowns.

What happens once a neighborhood decides it wants to convert abandoned homes to green space, or to create housing suitable for its flooded-out senior
citizens?

Who, other than Nagin himself, will guide the process? His administration doesn't even have a housing director in place. Alberta Pate, who still officially holds that post, went on medical leave during the campaign, and it's unclear when or whether she'll return.

Which entity will buy out homes that owners don't want, and how will they decide how to dispose of them?

And the big one: Will some areas be declared off-limits, or unsafe, for redevelopment? If so, by whom? We still don't know.

All of these questions are vital because money for the LRA's rebuild/buyout grants is due in late summer or early fall. Once people get their checks, will they know enough to decide what to do with them?

To be fair, absolute clarity may be too much to ask at this stage.

But some sense of direction, and soon, seems to be the bare minimum.