NEW ORLEANS mayor sees rebuilding plan by year-end

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By Peter Henderson

NEW ORLEANS, June 26 (Reuters) - New Orleans may take until the end of the year to develop rebuilding plans for all the neighborhoods of the storm-savaged city, Mayor Ray Nagin said on Monday, dismissing criticism that the process is dragging.

Hurricane Katrina flooded 80 percent of the city last August, soaking tens of thousands of houses in fetid water for weeks. The disaster left residents uncertain where to rebuild, yet also gave the city a chance to reshape itself.

Even 10 months later, many areas of the city are still cleaning up rather than rebuilding, with only isolated signs of construction in hard-hit areas full of empty houses.

Nagin described a neighborhood planning process led by the city council -- a process slowed due to funding problems earlier in the year -- while critics have said the mayor should develop a vision for the entire city that would act as a framework for citizens in different areas.
"At the latest before the end of the year we should have every neighborhood pretty well done. But the key neighborhoods that were most devastated, they are on track, and some of them are 80 percent done with their planning process," he said.

"This whole perception that we haven't been doing a plan, it's just, I don't know how to coin it, it's just not reality-based," he said, adding that crucial levee information and flood data was made public only about the beginning of June.

"We have been planning absent that relevant information, and now that we have that, we are moving much quicker," he said.

Others have not seen such speed.

Both U.S. senators for Louisiana, a Republican and a Democrat, said the city is slow in planning and must seize the opportunity now that Congress has approved more than $12 billion in rebuilding funds.

"We are behind the curve in that and we do need to make strong bold decisions on the ground here to do the right thing, which may not always be politically easy, or politically popular, but we need a plan about where to
focus activity and resources and rebuilding," Republican Senator David Vitter said late last week, echoing a New York Times editorial.

Standing next to him, Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu agreed that city planning needed work.

"It's a challenge," she said. "The rubber hits the road right here, in the parishes, in the neighborhoods, on the ground."

Discussions throughout the city range from whether some neighborhoods should be turned into parks, if the city should concentrate resources or replicate what it had, and which areas and houses should be elevated.

To do that, many want a grand vision.

"It is getting late," for a plan, the Times-Picayune newspaper said in an earlier this month editorial faulting "a lack of leadership and coordination".

It said it was encouraged that Nagin seemed "ready to get the planning process moving" but called for a citywide plan.

"Unless the city comes up with a realistic reconstruction plan soon, outside
entities -- such as insurance companies -- will end up having more influence over New Orleans' future than the city residents or their elected representatives have," the paper said.