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NATIONAL NEWS

Nothing's simple in the Big Easy

***Spiked* (London, UK)**

October 17, 2006

By Jack Shenker

The rebuilding of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina is a mixture of racial tensions, conspiracy theories and indomitable spirit. Jack Shenker reports from the Crescent City.

‘In London they say if two people stand on a corner, a queue forms. In New Orleans, a parade starts.’ The observation is as true today as it was when local writer Marda Burton made it six years ago. In a city that can be languid and demented in equal measure, fizzing with drama and mired in dormancy all at the same time, one thing has remained constant in the year since Katrina: the tendency for music, dancing and costume to burst out and hit you in the face when you least expect it. ‘That hurricane didn’t weaken the culture or strengthen the culture,’ says Sylvester ‘Hawk Mini’ Francis, whose backstreet museum showcases the flamboyantly colourful outfits of Mardi Gras Indians. ‘Culture is culture. Ain’t no hurricane that’s gonna change that.’

Like the Mardi Gras Indians who painstakingly begin working on a whole new suit as soon as each year’s festival comes to an end, the people of New Orleans are rebuilding from square one with few complaints. After a flurry of international interest in their story at the time of Katrina’s anniversary, they have been left to get on with it for another year. Bells were briefly rung, silences were carefully observed, and a humble George Bush dined at a local pancake house before flying back to Washington. Then, like the floodwaters that overwhelmed the city a year ago, media presence in the Crescent City subsided, leaving residents to reconstruct their lives here just as they have been doing since the storm hit – stutteringly, defiantly and through the help of one another rather than the support of the state. And now the anniversary has come and gone, the real story of post-Katrina New Orleans is only just beginning.

Collins Jasper is standing in the blazing midday heat pressing his head up against a seven-foot metal fence, crowned with rolls of barbed wire. Tomorrow the city will stop and remember the 1,500+ lives that Katrina stole from them; today, Collins is remembering how the aftermath of the hurricane stole his home. ‘Look at these places,’ he says, gazing across at the apartment where he used to live. ‘These places are fine. We wouldda moved back in the next day if we could, because we don’t need no lights, no gas. We can get candles. But this is our home.’ His mother Sharon nods in agreement. ‘We want the nation to see this is something they are stealing from us – stealing our heritage, our pride, our community.’

A day later, and Allan Mercadel – a 28 year old whose family have been homeowners in the Lower 9th Ward for seven generations – echoes Collins’ anger. ‘These are people who spent their blood, sweat and tears building their homes,’ he says quietly, gently banging a tambourine against his thigh as he surveys the ravaged neighbourhood. ‘A year later the place still looks like the city dump. A year later, and there’s still debris on the streets. We’re being left behind for a reason.’

The two men have never met, and their grievances with the city authorities are very different. Yet they are both a part of a complex and murky picture of post-Katrina reconstruction in New Orleans, ridden with accusations of discrimination, fear of cultural gentrification and the ceaseless reiteration of conspiracy theories. Hundreds of thousands of residents are still scattered across the country, crashing with friends or relatives in Vermont, Colorado or New Jersey, or holed up in trailer parks in Texas, Alabama and

Arkansas. Together, they constitute almost half of the city's pre-Katrina population. From preservation experts to property developers, the consensus is that the city needs most (although not necessarily all) of these New Orleanians to return if the city is to recapture the vibrancy that made it such a unique element within an increasingly-homogenised urban America. But after a succession of false starts, a regeneration programme that has been handled with varying degrees of incompetence and insensitivity – with only rare touches of efficiency – is only now working towards what is known as the 'Unified New Orleans Plan', an interconnected vision of what the Big Easy needs to do to recover, and how its going to do it.

The fear of many former residents is that this vision does not include them, and that the New New Orleans will be shorn of many of the communities from which its famous spirit is drawn. Many developments have helped generate this fear; some are borne out of the city authority's ineffective government over the past year, others out of the actions of businesspeople seeking to profit from the disaster, others still from the inevitable controversies thrown up when a patchwork city of diverse cultural neighbourhoods is redesigned almost from scratch.

One pillar of the reconstruction effort that spans all three is the contentious plan to redevelop the city's public housing stock. Twelve months on from the hurricane and all but a fraction of the public housing units – home predominantly to black, working-class New Orleanians – remain closed, shuttered up and fenced off despite the buildings sustaining little flood damage. Residents of these housing projects remain displaced in far-flung towns and states, victims of what they believe to be a brazen plan to write them out of New Orleans' future.

But the current attack on public housing is nothing new. In 1996 there were over 13,000 publicly-funded, affordable housing units in the city; by the time Katrina struck, that had been steadily reduced to 7,100 – many of which were uninhabitable. Now, with New Orleans facing the greatest shortage of affordable housing in its history, the Department for Housing and Urban Development has announced plans to permanently demolish 5,000 of the remaining units. 'What Katrina did was give these folks a scapegoat,' says Jasper, who has lived in the St Bernard housing project ever since he was born. 'They been trying to get at us for as long as I can remember.'

From the perspective of the city authorities, the storm has handed New Orleans a golden opportunity to clear up the problem of public housing once and for all. The official plan is to replace public developments with 'mixed-income' complexes that accommodate both poorer, working class residents who are subsidised by the state, and wealthier residents who can pay the market rate. It's a bold move, and it's being pioneered in New Orleans by Pres Kabacoff, an influential local property developer, whose 'River Gardens' construction is being used as a model for the regeneration of low-income housing.

The charge against Kabacoff is that by levelling the public housing projects, the city is making it impossible for those that lived there to return. There are dark rumours of developers eyeing up the prime real estate that some of the projects sit on (such as

Iberville, only a few blocks north of the French Quarter), and the numbers of affordable housing units available in mixed-income developments simply don't stack up. And running through all of this is a constant fear that certain groups are simply being squeezed out. 'We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did,' said Republican Congressman Richard Baker in an infamous comment made after the storm had struck. Many residents fear it reflects the real priorities of the business and political elite – to rid the city of its poorest communities.

It's a charge Kabacoff vigorously denies. 'What the international community knows of the city (the French Quarter, the business district, etc.) is still intact, it wasn't damaged by the storm,' he says. 'But what we're missing are the characters that give the city its life, and as a city we need to make sure we bring that culture back. And what's more we need to recognise that the city's workforce is of course comprised of poorer residents as well, and we need them back for economic reasons.' So why stop people returning to the projects? 'We cannot recreate the ghettos of the past. Previously we segregated poor housing away from wealthy and gated communities but we're now working with the federal government and the Louisiana Recovery Authority [tasked with overseeing the state's recovery from Katrina] to change the rules of that game.'

The idea sounds laudable – integrating New Orleanians into communities that aren't defined by the spending power of their residents. On the face of it, such a plan certainly seems preferable to replicating the projects as they were before Katrina, with disproportionately high crime rates and abject poverty. Yet one only has to look at the much-vaunted (and equally maligned) River Gardens to see what can go wrong with mixed-income developments. The complex replaced over 1,500 units of public housing at the St Thomas development, yet only a fraction of the new units will be 'affordable', displacing many families who have lived in St Thomas for generations. A Wal-Mart was thrown into the equation for good measure, making a mockery of the idea that the new development would foster an independent, socially vibrant community full of small enterprises. What's more, as part of the deal, the revenue from Wal-Mart's sales tax goes directly back into subsidising Kabacoff's enterprise, giving nothing back to the city.

There has been no shortage of experts willing to condemn the idea that River Gardens could provide a model for integrated and affordable housing in the post-Katrina New Orleans. 'It's really a worst case scenario, to have to demolish completely and start building all the way up again,' says Patty Gay, director of the city's Preservation Resource Centre. As a campaigner for the preservation of New Orleans' distinct architectural styles, styles which have evolved organically over countless generations, she believes that River Gardens is a perfect example of the dangers posed by large-scale planning, the type of which is enormously prevalent in the city today as it pursues a swift reconstruction. 'What we think really makes a neighbourhood and a city is incremental development, with people buying their own house and fixing it up themselves, or working with smaller developers. There's certainly a role after a disaster like this for big developers but for me it should be a last resort.'

For James Perry, a housing and civil rights advocate who heads the city's 'Fair Action Housing Center', the debate over public housing and mixed-income developments goes to the heart of the tension that New Orleans is straining under, with incompetence, mistrust and some genuinely visionary ideas all being thrown into a volatile cocktail. 'The principle that guides us – indeed, the principle that guides civil rights legislation in this country – is that separate cannot be equal,' he says. 'The goal is integration, for people from different cultures and different neighbourhoods to live together in the same neighbourhoods and go to the same schools.'

Consequently his organisation is finding itself torn between support for African-American public housing residents seeking help in resisting the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO)'s plans, and support for the city authorities who claim to be trying to end the economic and ethnic segregation that public housing inevitably creates. 'Our goal is integration, so this is a very tough call for us. If we don't side with the housing authority we miss out on a one-in-a-lifetime chance of integrating housing in the city of New Orleans. But where mixed-income developments have been used, such as in River Gardens, the residents have been cheated.'

He shows me some of the cases the Centre are looking into involving former residents of the St Thomas Housing project who were promised homes in River Gardens. One has spent the last twelve months sleeping in a car; another is shelling out \$1800 a month on private accommodation, leaving her barely enough money to eat. 'The suggestion that this is the system our post-Katrina housing system should be modelled on scares me to death. Residents simply don't believe the promises made about mixed-income housing because of what's happened in the past – all these lofty goals, and nothing was achieved.'

Whilst the city talks, public housing residents are acting. Some have joined a class-action lawsuit against HANO, whilst others have taken to direct action, arming themselves with boltcutters and power generators (electricity to the projects has not been reconnected) in an attempt to reoccupy their homes. Several protests and reoccupation attempts took place in the weeks after the Katrina anniversary; few were given any serious coverage in the local or national press.

'That's my apartment right there,' Diane Allen told me at one such incident at the CJ Peete development. Grandchildren danced around her feet as she blinked back tears at the sight of police officers, tipped off about the attempted reoccupation, standing guard over the door to her apartment, in the project she has lived in for 27 years. 'How does it make me feel to have police standing in front of my home? It makes me feel bad, bad that I can't walk up my own steps, stand on my own porch, turn my key in my own door.' She is currently living in Houston; others aren't so lucky. Fellow CJ Peete resident Kenneth Washington, who is 50 years old, is currently homeless. 'Man it feel like they took everything off my back, like there's no breath left in me,' he sighed. 'When this happens in Sudan, they call it ethnic cleansing, when this happens in Rwanda, they call it ethnic cleansing,' added protest organiser Mike Howells. 'When it happens here, they call it planning the "New" New Orleans.'

The public housing battleground is just one element of a larger debate over what should be retained and what should be abandoned in the updated Crescent City, a debate that becomes most saturated in suspicion and vitriol when it touches on the future of the Lower 9th Ward, the poor black neighbourhood that took the biggest hit from Katrina after the levee separating the area from the Industrial Canal gave way and billions of gallons of water flooded in.

I visited the Lower 9th on the day of Katrina's anniversary, with 28-year-old Allan Mercadel, whose family have lived in the Lower 9th for seven generations, as my guide. He spent the morning jostling amongst the crowds at a commemorative rally, enthusiastically shaking his tambourine in time with the music and shouting greetings at passers-by. 'Love you all too, take care of that little one now,' he grinned as a smiling pregnant woman pushed past the non-descript patch of grass we stood on by the canal. 'And don't fall!' he yelled after her, slapping the instrument against his legs in delight as she made her way down onto the muddy path below. 'I've been knowin' her all my life, she a childhood girlfriend from 7th grade,' he confided. He gave the tambourine a final, more doleful shake and added softly: 'She lost her grandmother due to the storm.'

A year ago, the name of this metropolitan district meant nothing to most Americans outside of New Orleans; today it is national shorthand for poverty, racial division and the evident failings of a federal government at a time when its citizens needed it most. Row upon row of deserted, dusty roads spread before us to the horizon. In some places the vista is sprinkled with the wreckage of houses and the bright glint of crushed car parts reflecting the morning sunshine. But for the most part the roads border nothing but emptiness, with grass and weeds having overgrown the plot where a home once stood.

'Hard to believe ain't it,' chuckled Allan softly. 'This little bitty ass city is where the whole world wants to come.'

On a day when the city authorities knew the eyes of the world were upon them, the 9th ward was an awkward barb in an otherwise smooth PR message. 'New Orleans is back in business' journalists were told: restaurants were throwing open their doors, tourists were returning and soon the New Orleans Saints would begin a new season in the infamous Superdome – an event heavily advertised on local TV with images of the American football players huddling together in the venue's changing room, repeatedly chanting 'There's no place like home'. In St Louis Cathedral, a beautiful, understated white brick building at the heart of the city's French Quarter, the city's political elite welcomed President Bush to a special mass. 'The signs of progress are not always easy to see, but they are here,' announced Norman Francis, chairman of the state recovery authority. 'Schools are in session, people are rebuilding, businesses are reopening and the music of life has begun to return.'

Less than four miles away, with our backs to the point in the newly-rebuilt levee wall where the Industrial Canal gushed in, Allan told me a different story. Maligned by politicians for its crime levels and sidelined in some visions of the city's rebirth, former residents of the Lower 9th Ward, currently scattered across America, are on the

defensive. ‘Over here we all homeowners, there ain’t no project [public housing] here, no apartment complexes – these are homeowners,’ he explained ‘It’s a majority black neighbourhood and what is happening here, or rather not happening here, is racial. We’ve been abandoned. A lot of people don’t like to talk about it and wanna sweep it under the rug but if you keep sweeping so much shit under the rug the rug the rug’s not gonna be on the floor any more. This city’s gotta clean under the rug.’

When Mayor Nagin’s ‘Bring New Orleans Back’ commission released its recommendations on the the city’s reconstruction earlier this year, and revealed its final map of the future rebuilt city, the Lower 9th had a big green dot over it, indicating that it should be turned into parkland. Nagin abandoned that plan under the weight of critical voices and the pressure of a forthcoming election campaign, but today little has been done to get the area back on its feet; in most blocks electricity and water remain disconnected, buses remain non-existent and residents remain elsewhere – just two per cent have returned home.

‘The folks in the Lower 9 have been behind on everything,’ says James Perry. ‘Because it was the worst-devastated area they wouldn’t let residents come back to check out their homes until several months after everyone else was able to, which gave residents a much later start in getting the rebuilding process in motion. You couldn’t even file an effective insurance claim, because it wasn’t possible to carry out a damage assessment on your house.’

The slow progress means that, as in the housing projects, rumours of a carefully-crafted plot to force out New Orleans’ black community are common currency. ‘After the storm Donald Trump and his guys were over here buying shit up and playing monopoly,’ spat Allan. With the protesters gone, the area is eerily silent, devoid of any human presence or signs of government action, save the occasional military vehicle patrol that rumbled by in the distance. ‘We’re being left behind for a reason. They want this land. I believe there’s oil on this land, hell I used to swim in that swamp over there – I know this is good ground.’

Yet it isn’t only the African American community who are finding fault with developments in the Lower 9th. Many white New Orleanians are angry at the way in which the plight of the city’s black areas has dominated the national new agenda, complaining that all discussion of regeneration is being viewed through a racial prism. The storm did not discriminate by ethnicity, they argue, and the bald facts bear them out – Katrina exacted an almost equal death toll from blacks and whites, despite the former comprising 67 per cent of the area’s population.

Mike Serio, whose great-uncle founded a po-boy store on St Charles Avenue in 1958, a store that Mike has owned and run for thirteen years, is furious at what he describes as a deliberate attempt to stir up racial tension at a time when the city should be pulling together. Amongst the Louisiana State University football team paraphernalia that covers every available wall space is a handwritten advertismment for White Chocolate Dixie Beer, ‘as endorsed by Mayor Nagin’ – a sardonic reference to Nagin’s promise earlier this year

that the rebuilt New Orleans would be a 'chocolate city'. 'I'm just sick of all this stuff, we're all in it together, black and white, so why we gotta be so divisive?' he sighed as he piled sloppy meat onto my sandwich.

'You wanna see something sad about NO right now? Well, it's about people helping people. Go down to the Lower 9th Ward and there's a load of kids down there, young and white, college students from all over the country, and they're all helping out the residents, gutting their houses. It's a very noble and very good cause. But the people who live in these homes, who are having the work done for them, what the hell are they doing? Sitting around doing nothing, they're not helping themselves. They're waiting for the government, they're waiting for someone else to come along and put them back together instead of getting off their arses and doing it for themselves. It's a cultural thing, because they're used to the government taking care of them and giving them everything they want. All you gotta do is scream and yell loud enough and it'll be done for you.'

Although they wouldn't admit it, Mike's views about the work ethic of the African American community, and the community's attitude to post-Katrina regeneration, is one shared by a large proportion of the city's white middle-class. The notion that black New Orleanians are more interested in making a fuss and demanding assistance instead of buckling down and getting on with the job of rebuilding emerges most strongly when comparisons are made with New Orleans' Vietnamese community, the densest concentration of Vietnamese people anywhere in the world outside of Vietnam itself.

Drive twelve miles east out along the Chef Menteur Highway and a cacophony of Vietnamese signs suddenly springs up from the roadside. The story of the people who live here is a remarkable one. Five families from a handful of Catholic villages in northern Vietnam fled the Communists together in 1954; today there are over a thousand families in this far-flung New Orleans neighbourhood, with 4,000 Vietnamese living within a one-mile radius of the central church. 'You have to remember that the experience of this community is very unique,' says Father Vien, the community's leader. 'The overwhelming majority of these people were forced to migrate to the South in very arduous conditions, risking their lives. They had to walk through the killing fields of Cambodia to Thailand, and wait for years in a dismal environment before finally making it to America. And so – and I say this with all sincerity – Katrina was a minor inconvenience to us.'

Katrina's memory usually produces a weary torrent of gloomy tales; in Versailles, it is refreshing to hear a more positive account of the storm and the consequent road to recovery. Members of the Vietnamese community were back home within days of the hurricane passing, dodging military checkpoints and joining in a highly efficient local relief effort organised by the church. Together they lobbied the council and the energy companies to restore services to the area and one-by-one the house lights started blinking back on in Versailles, even while the rest of New Orleans East was plunged in darkness. 'It's a question of "chicken and egg" and I think that's where other communities have been caught in a vicious cycle,' says Father Vien. The city has only been willing to pour resources into neighbourhoods to which people are returning, but in many areas people

are unwilling to return precisely because basic services aren't up and running. The close-knit nature of the Vietnamese saw them flooding recovery meetings with representatives and swamping the local electricity company with forms demanding reconnection. 'The very nature of the Vietnamese being a communal people means that in times of peace things can be problematic because everyone knows everybody else's business, and our young people resent that – they highly value the individualism of America. However when it comes to times of crisis, it's a different ball game. We have a very clear structure and it gets results.'

That unique structure – decisions are made through the church and quickly followed through – is not present in other communities, which are more disparate and decentralised. A prime example is Versailles recent victory in a campaign to close a city dump that had been unceremoniously planted on their doorstep. So although many people make unflattering comparisons between the recovery rate of the black community and those in Versailles, Father Vien resents being used as a stick with which to attack African Americans. 'Yes, we prefer to stay under the radar. The only thing we ask of government is not to impede our work, that's all – our attitude us "don't call us, we'll call you". But I don't think that means other people can "learn from us" because we truly have a community, whereas other areas are neighbourhoods. Everyone here knows where the leadership is. We have meetings, I make a decision and we do it – tell me another community that can do things like that?'

Bobbing up from the areas of stagnation, signs of recovery are intensifying. Wander through the vacant blocks of a noiseless Upper 9th Ward and before too long you'll stumble upon the whirring of drills and crash of hammers, as volunteers and future residents work overtime to construct a new village from scratch on a recently-acquired eight acre site. The project gives newly-built homes to poor New Orleanians on heavily subsidised mortgages, as long as they contribute 350 hours of 'sweat equity' to the construction work. 'Oh good, it feels so good,' said Linda Nunnery as she prepared to move into the one of the completed homes. Working for one of the city's hospitals, the mother-of-two was marooned in the Convention Center for four terrifying days last August and has been stuck in a trailer ever since. 'I got to build my own house, choose what's going in where, it feels like home. And it makes you feel proud, knowing I built that.' The 'Musicians' Village', as it has become known, fosters exactly the kind of civic pride that critics claim was lacking in the public housing projects, as home ownership and personal contributions to the building work help make residents feel like they have a genuine stake in the community.

A few blocks away, Janet Tobias stacks up some paint cans and proudly shows off her rebuilt home – one side is still gutted and bare, but the other is beautifully finished and our voices echo in the empty rooms. 'It's gonna take us three more months to finish off. My sons do most of it – I have asthma so I can't be in here too long. But the neighbours help as well,' she says. Her husband, a forklift truck operator, was one of the thousands trapped in the Superdome when the floodwaters rose; now Janet makes the eight hour journey from Alabama, where she has been forced to live for the past year, as often as she

can so she can work on the house. 'I'm fearful, I think the waters gonna come up again. But we wanna come back. In Arkansas, everyone wants to come back.'

There are thousands of Lindas and Janets making their way home, one way or another. The city they are returning to is dogged by tensions over the reconstruction process and in many quarters, enmeshed in conspiracy theories. But it is also dominated by an overwhelming desire to triumph over adversity and rise anew from the floodwaters. It is widely believed in several areas that the levees bordering the Lower 9th Ward were deliberately dynamited to protect wealthier parts of town; amongst the middle-classes there is frustration that their own struggle to reconstruct their neighbourhoods is being drowned out by disproportionate coverage of African American problems. But this concern is disingenuous; those with means find it easier on every level to get the financial and practical assistance they need to rebuild, and those on lower incomes have countless more obstacles in between them and a safe and sustainable return to New Orleans. And whilst the local newspaper publishes a heart-warming weekly column entitled 'Signs of Recovery' (recent listings have included a forthcoming Hummingbird and Butterfly Extravaganza, and the opening of a new ice-making plant), the claims of injustice and high-level duplicity, from the projects to the 9th Ward, persevere.

'The truth is that although folks are right to be wary of the reconstruction process, you can hardly call it a conspiracy,' says James Perry. 'It's capitalism at play – people are out to make as much profit as they can. There's a lot of money to be made in the aftermath of a disaster, and people are doing exactly that, buying low and selling high. And the biggest problem is that it is not illegal. In fact, in many ways it's profoundly American.'

And so the story of New Orleans, a city whose limelight has dimmed for another year, continues.

Think Globally, Act Locally: Efforts to make homes and buildings more energy-efficient are focusing on the state, not the federal, level

The Wall Street Journal

October 16, 2006

By John M. Biers

The battle for energy conservation is being fought these days on multiple fronts.

Consider: California has bolstered efficiency standards for home heating and cooling systems. New York offers low-interest financing for green upgrades to homes. The hurricane-ravaged states of Louisiana and Mississippi are weighing the first-ever statewide standards for energy efficiency in home construction. The federal government, too, offers tax incentives to encourage more energy-efficient homes and appliances.

But there is no nationwide building code for making homes and other buildings more energy-efficient. And that, say some environmental groups, perhaps surprisingly, suits them fine.

In a departure from the stance taken by environmentalists in Europe, efforts to bring about mandatory efficiency standards for homes and buildings in this country are aimed squarely at the state, not the federal, level.

"In the U.S., often large-scale national policies lag behind, whereas smaller jurisdictions can be very progressive," says Nils Petermann, a research associate at the Alliance to Save Energy, or ASE, a nonprofit group in Washington, D.C. National standards styled on California's progressive plan would be great, but such a vision is "politically unrealistic," he says, because there is no will for such robust standards on a national level.

Pointing to progressive steps in some states, environmentalists laud an incremental shift toward greater efficiency, even as they clamor for more aggressive action.

To see how uneven progress is, take a look at the 14-year-old federal Energy Star program, a voluntary initiative characterized by tremendous differences in participation rates by various states. The program features inspectors who certify homes as eligible for favorable tax treatment, in some states, if they are at least 15% more energy-efficient than homes built to the 2006 International Energy Conservation Code. Among the states with the most qualifying homes are New Jersey (36% of new homes), Arizona (21%) and Texas (31%), according to Energy Star, a joint project of the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy.

Some states, including New Jersey and Texas, offer financial incentives to builders that construct homes that qualify for Energy Star. In other cases, such as Nevada, which has a 43% participation rate, there are no financial incentives, but the program succeeds because it is championed by local home builders who make lower utility bills and better environmental performance part of their sales pitch to prospective buyers, says David Lee, branch chief for the Energy Star home residential program at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Gulf Coast states, meanwhile, are among the least active in the program, with Louisiana rated at 10% participation or less, and Alabama and Mississippi rated at under 3%, Energy Star says.

"I certainly see a lot of progress [at the state level]," says Jeff Harris, vice president for programs at the ASE.

But Mr. Harris would still like to achieve a few victories in Washington, where his policy wish list includes stepped-up federal spending on energy-efficient technology and greater efficiency in federal buildings. He also urges an extension of federal tax credits that provide as much as \$2,000 for builders of new homes that exceed 2004 international code standards by 50%, and up to \$500 for the purchase of equipment to upgrade energy efficiency on existing homes. The incentives currently expire after 2007.

Like most observers, however, Mr. Harris agrees that the idea of something as sweeping as a nationwide building code with energy-efficiency requirements remains far-fetched for now.

It's a "futuristic dream," says Cosimina Panetti, outreach manager for the Building Codes Assistance Project, which was started by three environmental groups and gets funding from the Department of Energy. Rather than attempt to achieve -- and impose -- a federal standard, the strategy of the building-codes project is to work with local officials to promote energy-efficiency standards on a regional level.

To be sure, Ms. Panetti, who recently has spent a lot of time in states along the Gulf of Mexico, says she sees the wariness of local governments. Building codes are established and enforced locally in the U.S, she notes, and in some states, there are no statewide standards, or very weak ones. In others, a lack of personnel forces inspectors to focus on safety and fire codes at the expense of insulation and window standards.

Still, it's at the state level that her group feels it can be most effective. "We never looked at Mississippi and Alabama before," says Ms. Panetti. "Now we have this tremendous rebuilding that's poised to happen."

Clearly, there's a lot that can be done at the local residential level. Residential use accounts for 22% of total U.S. energy consumption, according to the Energy Information Administration, a division of the Department of Energy.

Conservation at home could help forestall a predicted 25% jump in residential energy use by 2025, according to a 2005 report by the ASE. The alliance based its projection in part on the trend toward bigger houses in the U.S., and added that builders and homeowners could help ease the growing power load by using numerous products and technologies already on the market, such as central air conditioners that are 50% more efficient than current industry standards, and newer windows that are 25% more efficient than traditional designs.

"Overall building energy efficiency could be improved by 10% to 30% over the next 10 years" using technologies already available, said the ASE report.

Still, a large caveat was attached to the report's predictions about energy savings. The gains, it conceded, are dependent on "significant energy-efficiency policies and incentives . . . to overcome the barriers to deployment." The report urged federal regulators to speed new standards for some energy-guzzling appliances.

Among the biggest problems cited in the report: a moribund regulatory structure in many states. Ten states have "extremely weak" residential energy codes, or no codes at all. And even though there are some 90,000 building-code officials in the U.S. -- at federal, state and municipal levels -- local agencies are typically understaffed and give greater weight to building safety rather than energy performance.

Stirring change is particularly difficult where there isn't a legacy of progressive policy on energy efficiency. Though environmentalists haven't historically focused much of their efforts on the Gulf Coast, for example, they are raising their visibility in the wake of last year's storms.

"We have to be respectful of the culture they have, and that culture is home rule," says Ms. Panetti, who in the year since Hurricane Katrina has visited the Gulf Coast six times, and has at least two more trips planned. In presentations to state and municipal officials, she tries to prompt building-code changes that promote efficiency as the states begin to rebuild tens of thousands of storm-ravaged homes.

The effort has so far met with mixed results. While Alabama and Mississippi haven't implemented statewide building standards for energy efficiency, Louisiana approved statewide standards that address energy use for the first time. But the state faces implementation challenges dealing with lack of personnel.

"The main challenges are [the shortages of] plan reviewers and inspectors," says Darrell Winters, an energy engineer with the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, who adds that Louisiana's poorest parishes lack the tax base to fund new staff.

If Louisiana and Mississippi are at one extreme, then states like California and New York are at the other.

California, the first state to implement building codes on energy efficiency, in 1974, updates its standards every three years. In one of the more significant recent changes, the state last year began requiring homeowners to test duct systems whenever they upgrade a heating or air-conditioning system. The rules call for builders to seal leaks if the testing discovers too much air seepage.

"It's been controversial," John Wilson, a senior adviser to the California Energy Commission, says of the new requirement. Some homeowners and builders get annoyed, he says, when they learn they have to follow this rule.

California also employs financial incentives to promote efficiency, such as rebates of \$200 to \$400 for installing energy-efficient furnaces, a policy administered through local utilities. "We're firmly convinced in California that building codes are essential and that incentives are an essential complement to standards," Mr. Wilson says. "You need both."

New York also updates its building code often, but state officials there are more measured in assessing the benefits of regulatory standards. New mandates are useless if regulators and building contractors don't understand the changes, says Rick Gerardi, director of residential programs for the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. "You've got to deal with the folks who are building the houses," Mr. Gerardi says. "You can't just throw a bunch of bureaucratic language at them and expect them to change."

The New York agency focuses much of its attention on getting contractors to participate in the Energy Star program, either by building homes that qualify for the program or by performing upgrades that qualify existing homes. The upgrading program typically starts with a \$100 to \$200 energy audit that includes a "blower door" test that employs a powerful fan to test for air leakage in homes.

Following such a test, an Energy Star contractor -- who must be certified by the state agency -- might add caulking or foam to improve home insulation. A typical homeowner might pay \$8,000 and see energy consumption fall by 30% or more, Mr. Gerardi says. The state of New York can provide low-interest loans for the work. Homeowners may also qualify for a tax credit of as much as \$500 under the 2005 energy bill. "If your heating system is more than 10 years old, you're probably using 25% more energy than you need to," Mr. Gerardi says.

Some 12,000 homes have been upgraded in New York state in the past four years, but as many as 6,000 upgrades are expected this year. In another five years, state officials hope to see as many as 15,000 homes retrofitted per year.

"Our role is to kind of hector people to do things they wouldn't do on their own," says Gunnar Walmert, program director for the buildings and industrial research division of the New York energy authority.

In some ways, an experiment now taking place in Europe will offer a chance to see whether public pressure can foster widespread change. The European Union Commission in Brussels is attempting to legislate more efficient energy use with a directive that compels the union's 25 member states to establish a mandatory system for rating energy efficiency in commercial and residential buildings.

Betting on the merits of greater transparency, the measure requires the public display of the efficiency ratings in large buildings and gives prospective buyers or renters of residential properties legal rights to the same information. The commission's goal is to prod construction improvements and upgrades by bringing market pressures to bear on owners of buildings and homes. Studies by the commission predict the program will boost EU energy efficiency some 20% by 2010.

"We do believe the directive does have the potential for a fairly dramatic effect on energy consumption in the building sector," says Randall Bowie, principal administrator for the EU Commission directorate for energy. "But it will take time."

Already there has been considerable foot-dragging by member nations, which were supposed to have adopted the commission's directive into national legislation by Jan. 1, 2006. So far, only five have done so: Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania and Portugal. Most of the rest are lobbying for an extension, citing shortages of building-code inspectors.

Would such a system work in the U.S.? At this point, many people are skeptical. "Americans by and large buy first on cost," says Mr. Walmart, contrasting the U.S. perspective with the efficiency-first sentiment in the EU. "Americans really do not internalize efficiency as a value because energy has always been viewed as so cheap."

LOCAL NEWS

La. health care survey shows appetite for reform

Associated Press Newswires

By Melinda Deslatte

October 16, 2006

BATON ROUGE, La. - Louisiana residents overwhelmingly back an overhaul to the state's health care system, with four out of five people surveyed recently saying they would consider supporting a revamp that could sideline the charity hospital system.

Seventy-two percent of the people surveyed believe the current public health system needs to be reformed or completely rebuilt to better care for the uninsured, according to results released Monday by the nonpartisan Council for a Better Louisiana.

Eighty-one percent said that could include hospital options other than the charity system run by LSU -- if the change didn't cost the state more money, a questionable prospect.

"People are definitely not wed to the system if there are other alternatives," Barry Erwin, CABL president, said Monday.

The poll released Monday is another piece of a continuing debate over how to redesign and rebuild the flood-ravaged health systems in New Orleans and around Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina.

State officials are supposed to offer a redesign plan by Friday to U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt, and a 40-member group called the Louisiana Health Care Redesign Collaborative is working on that plan.

The federal health secretary can waive regulatory rules that limit how Louisiana can spend the billions of dollars in federal money it receives each year for health services.

But Leavitt backs a system that would send more money to private and community health providers and move away from the longtime charity hospital model unique to Louisiana. Leavitt prefers that the state use its dollars to "follow people rather than institutions," setting up an insurance system for the poor and uninsured.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco has pledged to rebuild a charity hospital in New Orleans to replace the flooded facilities. Many powerful Democratic state lawmakers have staunchly refused to back a plan that would do away with the charity hospitals in any fashion.

But the CABL survey, a telephone poll of 630 residents conducted from Sept. 11 to Sept. 21, shows the public wants change, even if politicians don't, Erwin said.

"The people are not obstacles to reform," he told the Press Club of Baton Rouge as he unveiled the survey results. "I think the public is ahead of the politicians on this."

The poll, done by the LSU Public Policy Research Lab, had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

Some questioned whether the survey could adequately account for Katrina evacuees who may still be living out of state -- those who are among the poorest New Orleans area residents who might be most reliant on the charity hospital system. Areas with higher minority and lower income residents in New Orleans were more heavily sampled to account for displaced residents, said Kirby Goidel, an LSU professor who worked on the survey.

People who were polled strongly believed the uninsured who rely on public hospitals get care inferior to that given people who have insurance and more health care choices. Sixty-five percent said the uninsured in Louisiana don't get the same level of care as the insured.

Of the uninsured residents who were surveyed: less than half said they had a regular doctor who knew their medical history, nearly a third said they received their medical care in more costly emergency rooms rather than doctors' offices, and they were much more likely than the insured residents surveyed to have to wait for needed care.

Suggestions of a shift to more choices for the poor and uninsured and away from the charity hospital model, however, generate complaints. Many state officials say Leavitt's plan is too costly to Louisiana because Leavitt isn't offering new health care money to finance it.

After separate meetings in New Orleans with Leavitt, state Health and Hospitals Secretary Fred Cerise and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said Monday that they were encouraged.

"Hopefully the collaborative will come forward with something by Friday, and bring something to the Legislature by the year's end. So it still looks OK," Nagin said.

Leavitt continued to stress the need for what he sees as, ultimately, a national health plan -- universal insurance, with payments for people rather than to hospitals. He says it would save money because people would consider cost as well as quality.

"Based on advice I'm getting from experts who deal with Medicare, and Medicaid systems all over America, I believe the combination of the current dollars already being spent in the Louisiana health care system and savings that come as costs grow more

slowly, can provide access to affordable health insurance for those who are now uninsured and need help," he said in a 3-page statement.

He said LSU is an indispensable part of health care in Louisiana, but its plans must be part of the larger overall plan.

Legal eagles on lookout for fraudulent contractors; State, FBI getting prepared for a flood of consumer complaints over contractors

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 17, 2006

Fraudulent contractors, unlicensed contractors and the bilking of homeowners are reaching epidemic proportions, prompting federal and state agencies to beef up regulatory and criminal enforcement against unscrupulous businesses, officials said Monday.

The problems may have not hit their peak, with Road Home money still to be handed out, state and federal agencies said.

The law and license enforcement agencies are coordinating efforts to fine or jail bad contractors.

"The FBI and the U.S. attorney are fundamentally committed to ensure (the use of) recovery (money) is free of fraud, and we are cooperating to include contractors who engage in fraudulent activity," said James Bernazzani, FBI special agent in charge of Louisiana.

Bernazzani said that the disbursement of Road Home loans -- federal money -- gives the FBI jurisdiction, and any contractor stealing or fraudulently taking the money will be high on the FBI's radar.

"If you are a contractor fraudulently (taking) recovery money from homeowners, the FBI will take a very, very hard look at it," he said.

As Road Home money through the Louisiana Recovery Authority begins to be disbursed, the FBI and the Louisiana attorney general's office doubt complaints against contractors have approached the peak.

"I think eventually our active complaints will exceed 1,000 any given month," said Charles Marceaux, executive director of the Louisiana State Licensing Board for Contractors.

Marceaux said he expects that by the end of the year, his board will have held more than 800 administrative hearings since hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In past years, citation hearings have been about 300 to 400 a year, he added.

The citations are for being unlicensed, failing to perform as contracted or performing shoddy work. If egregious enough, the contractor's actions are forwarded to the attorney general's enforcement division, which will decide whether criminal action should be taken.

Isabel Wingerter, director of the general consumer protection section for the attorney general, said she would have expected a handful of consumer complaints in years past.

"We've never seen anything like this," Wingerter said.

Most of the criminal cases involve misappropriations of funds and theft by fraud, she said.

As of Monday, 194 cases had been referred to the attorney general's criminal division for investigation, 65 arrest warrants for theft or fraud had been issued and there were 140 ongoing criminal investigations against contractors. Additionally, 10 civil unfair trade practice investigations involving 140 contractors were pending, Jennifer Cluck, a spokeswoman for the attorney general, said.

Between contractors seeking licenses and consumers making complaints or seeking information, the contractor's board is fielding 80,000 calls a month.

Before Katrina, there had been about 15,000 licensed residential or commercial contractors or registered home-improvement contractors. Now, there are more than 20,000. Marceaux said that since Katrina, 5,397 new applications have been received.

Commercial licenses are the largest category at 2,648. Prior to last year's storms, there were 47 licensed mold remediation contractors. There have been 256 applications and licenses issued for mold contracts since the storms.

Marceaux said he's seeking support for legislation to stiffen the fines the board can levy and make it more difficult for a contractor to abandon a project.

Cluck urged consumers to use the attorney general's hotline, 1 (800) 351-4889, to make complaints. The phone bank is staffed from Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., but messages can be left anytime for a staffer to return a consumer's call.

The FBI's top agent said reports of potential criminal activity can also be reported by calling 1-800-CALLFBI. He was adamant, however, that the hotline is not for generic consumer complaints.

"Please don't call because you're peeved at your contractor," he said, but rather when there is obvious criminal activity.

Marceaux asked that consumers file complaints through the licensing board's Web site at www.lslbc.louisiana.gov/

Rising N.O. premiums troubling

The Baton Rouge Advocate

October 17, 2006

By Ted Griggs

A state auditor's report shows increasingly expensive homeowners insurance rates in parts of metro New Orleans and Lake Charles, a development recovery officials say could hamper efforts to repopulate areas devastated by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

A \$250,000 house in Belle Chasse can cost as much as \$7,688 a year to insure, according to the report released Monday by the state Legislative Auditor's Office. Insuring a \$145,000 house in the Gentilly area of New Orleans could cost more than \$4,300.

"It's sort of the other side of recovery. Insurance rates are going up. Utility rates are going up," said David Voelker, a member of the Louisiana Recovery Authority board of directors.

There are lots of costs that people do not usually think about when discussing rebuilding, he said. At present, insurance is one of the biggest problems facing recovery efforts.

"If you can't insure it, you can't build it," he said.

High insurance rates hurt economic development and add to the cost of living, Voelker said. For a person of modest income, coming up with an extra \$20 a month for electricity and \$100 for homeowners insurance is a lot of money.

Louisiana needs to get together with insurance companies and work to find a creative solution to keeping rates affordable, Voelker said, possibly some combination of state insurance pools and private insurance.

John Ware, executive director of the Livingston Economic Development Council, said he thinks fear of another storm will be a bigger factor keeping people from rebuilding.

"People just don't want to face that danger again," Ware said.

Ware recently sold his house to a retired Gretna couple that wanted to live on higher ground, not 'Ground Zero.'

Higher homeowners rates may discourage people from moving back to New Orleans, but people could do so after three or four years of calm weather, Ware said.

Denise B. Alix of New Orleans said her Lakeview home was destroyed by Katrina. Right now she's paying for \$200,000 worth of coverage on a vacant lot and worrying whether she will be able to buy insurance when she rebuilds her house — 8 feet off the ground.

State auditors usually check the financial books and operations of government agencies.

They got the idea for a property insurance survey while reviewing the operations of the state Department of Insurance, said David Greer, assistant legislative auditor and director of performance audit.

“We were looking at what kind of information might be most valuable right now,” he said.

Greer said the information might be valuable not just for individual property owners but also for local officials who are deciding where and what kind of rebuilding to allow in storm-struck areas.

The auditor’s office surveyed seven insurance companies — six responded — seeking the average replacement cost for a house, its age and square footage in 23 ZIP codes. The report did not compare pre-hurricane prices to current levels.

LRA board member Walter Leger Jr. said it is hard to draw conclusions from the auditor’s report because one cannot compare current rates to those before the hurricane.

However, an Insurance Department report found that in 2005, coverage for a \$200,000 house in New Orleans ranged from \$1,031 to \$3,481. The department surveyed 28 companies. The Legislative Auditor’s report shows similar coverage for a \$190,000 brick house in the Tulane/Carrolton area ranged from \$2,527 to \$5,124.

Leger questioned why rates on an average brick house would be so much more expensive for homeowners in Lakeview (\$3,536 to \$6,490) than Covington (\$1,701 to \$4,343).

He pointed out insurance companies paid little in wind damage claims in Lakeview because they said most of the damage was caused by flooding, yet in Covington, they had to pay out almost all of the wind damage claims because there was no flooding.

Insurance Department chief of staff Chad Brown said homeowners premiums had begun increasing in Louisiana’s coastal areas, and the rest of the country’s, before Katrina struck.

“A number of carriers felt for years that their premiums (in coastal areas) were not adequate, and that they were being subsidized by areas in other parts of the state,” Brown said.

Since the hurricane, the Insurance Rating Commission has given roughly 30 firms permission to raise rates by more than 10 percent. The increases have ranged from an average of 10 percent to an average of more than 50 percent.

The amount of the increase varies, depending on the area. Homeowners in the New Orleans area and along the state’s coast have seen the greatest rate increases.

Brown said he expects insurance rates will eventually calm down and stabilize, much as they did after 9/11. But Brown said he does not expect rates to fall.

In the meantime, the Insurance Department and Insurance Rating Commission's job is to make sure that the rates that property and casualty companies request are reasonable and justifiable statistically, Brown said.

Flood residue crippling city's gas lines; Rebuilding system will mean rate hike

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 17, 2006

By Pam Radtke Russell

As water burst through the levees and flooded New Orleans, it not only covered the ground but flowed underground through cracks and breaks in gas lines, filling the miles of gas pipes that crisscross the city.

When the floodwater receded above ground, it stayed in the pipes below.

The water posed a temporary problem for Entergy New Orleans in providing gas service to the city. Its salty corrosive residue, however, left a lasting effect on the cast-iron and steel pipes.

While gas service is currently available to most of the city -- except for Lake Catherine, a portion of the Lower 9th Ward and small sections of Lakeview and Gentilly -- rapidly corroding cast-iron and steel pipes throughout the city have put the future of the system in jeopardy. If nothing is done, 60 percent of the gas system, 844 miles of pipeline, could be inoperable in a matter of years.

But the entire system doesn't have to be rebuilt at once. In fact, the speed at which the system is restored -- and the extent to which it is rebuilt -- will be key factors in determining just how much gas rates go up. And even though the Louisiana Recovery Authority last week rejected Entergy's request for \$355 million in Community Block Development Grant money for rebuilding the gas system, rates won't necessarily increase immediately.

Under the worst-case scenario, Entergy's 65,000 gas customers, including 13,000 in Algiers, could see their base rates skyrocket 311 percent to \$109 per month, according to a calculation by the Louisiana Public Service Commission. Entergy has already requested a 161 percent increase because of the lower number of customers.

But under the best-case scenario, if Entergy and the city of New Orleans can agree on a strategy of rebuilding the system, gas bills might increase minimally and those increases could be five or more years off.

Currently, Entergy is moving forward with plans to begin rebuilding the entire system this January.

Until the company hears otherwise that certain sections of the city won't be redeveloped, it is "trying to figure out ways to bring back gas just like it was pre-Katrina," said Dan Packer, Entergy New Orleans' chief executive officer. "That's our obligation, because we have a franchise."

But City Council President Oliver Thomas said Entergy needs to look at scaling back the gas system.

"That's a cop-out," he said of Entergy's claim that it must provide gas to the entire city. "Are they required to provide gas to abandoned houses and blocks? I still believe that they should be a little more proactive to work on that. It all ties into planning and repopulation. I don't think they've done their planning and due diligence on this."

Time on its side?

Most of the attention on Entergy since Hurricane Katrina has been focused on the electrical grid. Residents and city officials want reliable electricity to all parts of the city, a goal the City Council and Entergy have been striving toward.

But the gas system is a different story. Except for sporadic outages because of water that remains in the system, the gas system is running fine. Although Entergy needs money now to cover costs related to electricity restoration, the company has about 10 years to repair the gas system, said Ron Nichols, managing director of Navigant Consulting, a Chicago-based company that the Louisiana Recovery Authority hired to analyze Entergy's request for block grant money.

"You have a fundamental difference between gas and electric systems," Nichols said. "When electric systems get damaged, they are either on or they are off. It can't operate until you fix damage. A gas system can incur damage and still operate for a while."

Yet the longer-term costs needed to repair the gas system are often lumped together with the immediate needs of repairing the electric system.

Putting the two systems together might provide a false picture of what will happen to rates for electric customers on the east bank who don't have gas service, or the 13,000 customers in Algiers who get their gas from Entergy New Orleans and electricity from Entergy Louisiana.

The Louisiana Public Service Commission calculated that without Community Development Block Grant money, base gas rates for Entergy New Orleans' 65,000 gas customers could more than triple from \$26.56 to \$109.90.

By comparison, the Public Service Commission calculated that electric base rates would go from \$52.37 to \$72.83, an increase of 40 percent. Those two increases together would boost total electric and gas rates by 127 percent.

But the bulk of that increase might not fall on gas users for several years, Nichols said.

The majority of Entergy's anticipated \$250 million insurance settlement is expected to go to the gas system. Entergy has said that it expects to spend at least \$35 million a year rebuilding that system. The company plans to finish the gas system rebuild by 2013, Packer said.

"That whole length of time gives us some time for rate relief or more money from the LRA," he said.

If the company is able to use insurance money for system repairs, at a rate of \$35 million a year, it would be about five years before Entergy runs out of insurance money and has to turn to customers.

By then, more should be known about where people are rebuilding and the extent of the gas system damage, either lessening the amount needed for rebuilding or spreading the cost over a greater number of customers.

"I don't think it makes any sense to build back the way it was," said Joe Vumbaco, a City Council adviser. "There has to be some logic to this and based on the rebuilding."

A historical system

The history of New Orleans' gas system is inextricably tied to the history of New Orleans. In 1835, the city was among the first in the nation to have a gas plant that was used to illuminate the city.

While most of the city's gas pipes have been laid or replaced since then, when Hurricane Katrina struck the system's gas pipes were still on average 50 or more years old, and some of the cast-iron pipes were more than 100 years old.

Yet, the large 6-inch-to-30-inch cast-iron or steel pipes had served the city well, and Entergy was counting on several more years of service from them.

"It has a really good history, the ability to serve reliably," said Rusty Burroughs, Entergy's regional manager of gas operations.

The system's age worked against it when Hurricane Katrina struck.

"No one designs a gas system to have salt water flood through it," Nichols said.

Not only are the metal gas pipes susceptible to corrosion, the majority of the pipes were low-pressure lines that allowed the water to get into the pipes.

By comparison, Atmos Energy, which supplies gas to St. Bernard and Jefferson parishes, has newer high-pressure lines that kept the water out.

"We were fortunate. When we lost the system, there was still pressure in the lines," said Karl Weber, a spokesman for Atmos. Atmos has been able to re-establish service to almost all of its service areas except Shell Beach and Ycloskey, where the storm irreparably damaged the gas lines.

But in most other areas, the gas pressure kept the water out and saved most of the system, except for in an older section of low- pressure pipe in Arabi on the edge of the Lower 9th Ward. There, gas lines suffered the same fate as those in New Orleans. Atmos is waiting to see where it needs to rebuild in that area, portions of which may be designated as greenspace by the St. Bernard Parish Council.

Because of lesser damage and because a much greater customer base, Atmos customers in the old Louisiana Gas Service district, numbering about 250,000, will see rate increases of only about \$2.62 per month to pay for Katrina-related damage.

Nichols said that Entergy can't be faulted for the older system.

"Aging gas systems are a chronic problem for major metropolitan areas," he said. Some metropolitan areas even have wooden gas pipes.

Entergy, like other companies in its situation, has been slowly replacing the older low-pressure pipes with high-pressure plastic as it has become necessary.

Before Katrina, Entergy probably would have replaced a few miles of pipe a year, he said.

"What this has done is accelerated that need," Nichols said.

To determine when sections of the system will need to be replaced, Entergy is cutting out pieces of pipe and sending them to an independent analyst who is telling the company how much life the pipe might have left, Burroughs said.

In general, the post-storm cast iron is expected to have a life span of two to eight years, and the steel will last between five and 15 years, Burroughs said.

"It doesn't mean that every piece is going to last that long," he said.

About 60 percent of the gas system, or about 844 miles of pipes, will need to be replaced at a cost of, on average, \$450,000 per mile. Other parts of the system, usually pipes laid in higher ground and in Algiers, will be left alone. In addition, regulators, which control

the amount of gas sent to pipelines, and meters will be replaced. Entergy is including the paving work necessary in its costs to rebuild the gas system.

Entergy plans to replace about 100 miles of pipe next year, primarily in Uptown, Burroughs said. The company is trying to match the needs with the city's returning population and also make the repairs in conjunction with Sewerage & Water Board repairs, Packer said.

Gas dependency

While certain areas of the country, and even subdivisions in New Orleans, don't have natural gas, abandoning the system is not an option, industry experts said.

"Someone is going to have to rebuild the system," said David Dismukes, associate director for Louisiana State University's Center for Energy Studies. "There are so many appliances and systems that are based on natural gas."

In areas where natural gas is not available, plans are usually made before those areas are built to provide more electricity and install electric appliances.

Most New Orleans homes and businesses, because of their age, are built to use natural gas, which is more efficient for water heaters, furnaces and cooking, Dismukes said.

"You can't just say, 'I'm sorry, we're not going to provide gas to you anymore,' " Nichols said.

While it might be one thing for a homeowner to switch from gas to electric appliances, Nichols said it's unlikely businesses, especially restaurants, would be happy with electric-only service.

A McDonald's, for instance, is not going to want to use an electric grill, he said.

"If it was all just homes, maybe you could decide" not to restore gas service, Nichols said.

Vumbaco, though, argues that it doesn't make sense to build miles of pipeline to serve a few homes.

"In this case now, you maybe have blocks on end where you have one or two homes that need service," he said. "You have to evaluate. You have a limited amount of resources. As you start to look at where the city is growing and repopulating, you have to say 'Geez, it's going to cost us X million to put in gas for a just a few hundred people.' "

While that argument might make economic sense, Nichols said that sociologically, those decisions can't be made based solely on economics.

"If you can stand back from a detached perspective -- what makes the most economic sense -- it doesn't necessarily match what's the right thing to do socially. That's where the tension is," he said.

If Entergy or the city decides not to rebuild portions of the gas system, people in those areas are going to feel discriminated against, Nichols said.

And Entergy doesn't have the authority to make those kinds of decisions, he added.

Dismukes said Entergy could possibly provide propane gas for some customers that are not in concentrated population areas.

"It could be a flex fuel, go in and put propane tanks in until they were certain people were going to return," he said.

While some modifications would have to be done for a house to accept propane, Vumbaco agrees that it's an option. "You have to see what makes sense," he said.

Virginia Boulet, who is leading Mayor Ray Nagin's task force for affordable energy, agrees. Boulet doesn't think that the city's gas customers need to purchase a new gas system for Entergy New Orleans.

"They have to provide gas one way or another. How they provide that gas is unclear," she said.

Councilman Thomas is willing to consider anything to keep rates low and to keep the city's recovery on track. "There are still major patches of this community where no one has gone," he said.

Packer, though, sees things differently. "I don't think there's a part of the city people won't move to."

Corps to stop picking up debris; New Orleans has until end of the year

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 17, 2006

By Bruce Egger

Although thousands of homes in New Orleans still need to be gutted, the Army Corps of Engineers will stop collecting storm-related debris throughout New Orleans at the end of the year, city Sanitation Director Veronica White said Monday.

White urged home and business owners to finish gutting their properties as soon as possible.

"We are encouraging all citizens to gut and clean out their homes and businesses so that we can move to the next phase in our recovery process," she said.

As a preliminary step, the corps will stop picking up debris Nov. 1 in most parts of New Orleans that suffered relatively little flood damage from Hurricane Katrina.

In November, the corps will stop picking up debris in ZIP codes 70112, 70113, 70114, 70115, 70116, 70130 and 70131, White said. Those areas include Algiers, the French Quarter, Faubourg Marigny, the Central Business District, the Garden District and much of Uptown.

Residents in those areas will continue to receive weekly garbage collection through the Sanitation Department.

Both before and after the federal debris pickup ends, White encouraged residents and business owners to use city landfills and three free drop-off sites: 2829 Elysian Fields Ave.; Crowder Road at the I-10 Service Road; and 2301 Hendee Court, Algiers.

She urged all residents to separate their debris into four areas -- white goods, hazardous waste, electronics and construction debris -- to speed up the removal process and for safe disposal.

The white goods category includes refrigerators, stoves and similar appliances. Hazardous waste materials include paint and household chemicals. Electronic items include toaster ovens and televisions. Construction debris includes drywall, lumber and vegetation.

However, if a contractor is demolishing a house, the contractor is required to dispose of the debris in a permitted landfill.

For more information about trash pickup, call the city's information hot line at 311 or (504) 658-2299.

FEMA widens plan to remove trees; Private property added to program

New Orleans Times-Picayune

October 17, 2006

By Christine Harvey

After approving a plan to remove trees killed by saltwater intrusion from public property in Mandeville, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has broadened the scope of the program to also include dead trees on private property.

Residents and business owners in the old Mandeville area south of Monroe Street, and in some spots as far north as Villere Street, should expect to see workers in their yards within the next week or so, identifying the trees in advance of their removal, Mayor Eddie Price said.

The eligible trees are in areas that flooded during Hurricane Katrina, he said. Property owners won't be billed for the tree removal.

FEMA already has agreed to remove the dead trees from public property in the city, though it will be five or six weeks before the program begins, Price said.

The contract to do the work must be rebid because a minority contractor complained he did not have the opportunity to participate in the bidding process, as is his right by law, Price said.

As a result, Price could not say when the trees will start falling on private property. He said he isn't sure whether FEMA will include those trees in the bid for removing trees on public property or solicit separate bids.

New Orleans Saints: The Louisiana Conquering Heroes

Bayou Buzz

October 16, 2006

By Ed Staton

"The Saints and like the people in New Orleans as they are no longer victims, they are conquerers." ---Gov. Kathleen Blanco, after the Saints' victory Sunday

The Saints' resurgence continued on Sunday as Drew Brees flawless drive called by John Carney's field goal in a 27-24 victory over Philadelphia in a clash of division leaders. Brees threw for two of his three touchdowns in the first half, when the Saints built a 17-3 lead. But it was his play in the final quarter, after the Eagles had battled back to take the lead, that proved crucial.

The quarterback did his best work on a 16-play 72-yard drive that lasted in the final 8:26. He completed all 8 of his passes for 68 yards, setting up Carney for what amounted to a chip shot.

"That was pretty special," said Brees. "Sixteen plays, eight minutes and 26 seconds against a good team. That's tough."

"This was a heartbreaker," said Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb.

The Saints could be the second best team in the NFC (behind the undefeated Bears) was the conversation in the press box.

No team in their right mind wants to play the 5-1 Saints at home anymore, or anywhere else for that matter.

The Saints have many new faces this season, but this team has a sense of purpose that unites it.

"It's a whole different team," judged Eagles defensive end Darren Howard, who should know because he played for the Saints for six seasons before moving on to Philadelphia this summer.

The Eagles became the fifth team to lose to the Saints this season. Howard looked back at last season with the Saints and Katrina. The Saints coach at the time, Jimmy Haslett, tried using disrespect as motivation, telling his players the NFL shortchanged the team by moving them around without considering how difficult even the simplest tasks were for an organization that was still hurting emotionally and essentially homeless.

The ploy backfired soon enough. recalling the chaos that engulfed last season, Howard said, "It was rough. It's something you just had to deal with, and it never got any better. I wouldn't wish that on any other football team."

But Sean Payton turned out to be an inspired choice as leader, and not because he possesses one of the better offensive minds in the NFL. It didn't hurt of course that he served as the running backs coach at San Diego State when Marshall Faulk was there, and so had plenty of insight on how to deploy an all-purpose threat when Reggie Bush fell into New Orleans' lap. Or because he was the quarterbacks coach during a stint as an assistant with the Giants and knows how to find Brees the time and space to maximize his talent.

But Payton's real genius so far has been convincing his players that they can accomplish something more important than winning football games simply by doing their jobs well.

"I'm fired up for this city," Payton after Sunday's win. "I'm fired up for the people who come to watch us play. I couldn't be happier.

Neither could the Saints' long suffering fans, who bought up every season ticket in the Superdome and they haven't been shy about make their presence felt.

They don't see the signs Payton covered the walls of his office with -- a typical one reads: "Dumb players do dumb thins. Smart players seldom do dumb things." And they don't get the chance to hear speakers like Avery Johnson. the home \town kid who now coaches the NBA Dallas Mavericks, give chalk talks to his players.

But they see Bush, Brees and Deuce McAllister, among other Saints, donating their time and money in the community. They way that the players are received reinforces Payton's preaching that preparing to play a football game is part of helping rebuild a city.

Just before kickoff Sunday, Payton told an offensive line slapped together to cover some injuries: "No sacks today," and they held the Eagles without one.

"The Saints are doing it," said Howard, "with a young set of guys who don't remember what happened in years past...it's hard to say anything, but they're legitimate."

After five games, Joe Horn suddenly looked like the star player he was in 2004, with his should-shaking end zone dances and game-changing catches. Horn caught TD passes of 14 and 48 yards. "I've got to keep doing a better job of getting him involved early on." said Payton. "He plays hard and has been fantastic. He is everything you want in a player, If he has two catches and we win, he's happy. I admire that about him." Horn had 6 catches for 110 yards against the Eagles.

McAllister tweaked his hamstring early in the game and had to head to the sidelines. "The hamstring tightened up in the leg he had surgery on, and we had to loosen it up before he could re-enter," said Payton.

Saints defensive tackle Hollis Temple had six tackles against the Eagles, his team for a decade before joining the Saints. He "high-fived" McNabb after one play.

"The Saints every game like it's their last," said McNabb.

Desolate and alone: Pre-Katrina life long gone, far away for ravaged La. communities

The Baton Rouge Advocate

October 16, 2006

By Joe Gyan Jr.

NEW ORLEANS - When the Johnson family moved back into their Mirabeau Avenue home in flood-ravaged Gentilly on March 1, they had no neighbors. Seven and a half months later, they still are virtually alone.

Gerald and Barbara Dupre have been repairing their flooded Pontchartrain Park house on the border of Gentilly and New Orleans East since March, but because they don't have a neighbor for two blocks, they spend their nights at a cousin's home on Elysian Fields Avenue rather than in a FEMA trailer in their own front yard.

Al Hebron, his wife and high school-age son have been living in an upstairs apartment behind their flooded house on Louis XIV Street in devastated Lakeview since April.

They finally got their first neighbor earlier this month.

Similar examples of ghost town life can be found across the 80 percent of New Orleans that was heavily flooded by Hurricane Katrina on Aug. 29, 2005.

"It's just so desolate," Rhonda Johnson, who works at Touro Infirmary in largely unscathed uptown New Orleans, said of her Gentilly neighborhood just a few blocks from one of two floodwall breach sites on the London Avenue Canal. "Every day we look out of the window and see water lines and abandoned houses."

"Somebody just cut the grass across the street for the first time. I don't know who did it, but God bless 'em," she said.

Hebron, who said three people on his block drowned during Katrina, shakes his head in disgust when he looks across the street at an abandoned house with a large uprooted pine tree resting on it and another vacant house with furniture still strewn against a front window by the floodwaters from the 17th Street Canal floodwall breach.

"Whenever I come out here and see that tree and that furniture, I get really angry," Hebron, who has lived on Louis XIV for 31 years, said as he walked on his street that is devoid of human activity.

"A lot of people were worried about security, but there's nobody here. I brought my shotgun from Dallas when I came back, but there's no one to shoot it at," he said.

The Dupres said a FEMA trailer on vacant rental property across the street from their house on Congress Drive was broken into the day before Democratic U.S. Sens. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and Bill Nelson of Florida visited their home Sept. 21.

"Not at night," Barbara Dupre said when asked if she and her husband stay in the trailer.

"There's nobody around here but us. This block here, we're the only one. The next block too," her 77-year-old husband said. "I don't know what the holdup is with the people around here."

"They're not coming back. They're not coming back. She's not coming back," Barbara Dupre added, pointing to her neighbors' homes to the left, right and across the street.

Across the city, many homes have not been touched since the storm, as evidenced by the ruined belongings still inside and tall weeds and un-mowed grass outside. Some houses are gutted and boarded up; others show signs of construction activity. Some homes have been demolished, and all that remains is an empty lot covered with river sand. "For Sale" signs - by owner or commercial real estate companies - are everywhere.

The Johnsons' two-story brick home - with its green St. Augustine sod planted in February, Halloween decorations (a large inflatable Shrek figure holding a "GO SAINTS" sign) and other yard signs - stands out amid the devastated houses and dead landscaping up and down Mirabeau Avenue. There are two signs in the front garden - one from Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission that proclaims "We're home!" and another in New Orleans Saints black and gold that says "you gotta have FAITH."

Rhonda Johnson said the family was determined to return, despite suffering 81/2 feet of water in the house and living for four months at the Embassy Suites in Baton Rouge. She wishes others in the neighborhood would show the same determination. Their only neighbor is a man next door in a FEMA trailer with his 90-year-old mother.

"Neighbor wise, it's very slow. Very slow," she said.

Johnson suspects money, the lack of it, is holding many residents back. The Johnsons had flood insurance that helped them rebuild. She also said many of their neighbors were elderly.

Along the way, the Johnsons have had their naysayers.

"Why are you doing this? Are you crazy?" she said, recounting some of the questions that neighbors and passers-by have posed. "Then you have some that are back because we came back."

Johnson is guardedly optimistic about her neighborhood's return.

"It's going to come back eventually. I really do think it's going to come back. It's just going to take an awfully long time," she said. "It's just slow, slow, slow."

Johnson said she sorely misses the good times.

"The cleanliness of it all. The children. Dogs barking," she said.

The Dupres, who celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary Sept. 20 and have lived in their neighborhood for 49 years, also long for their pre-Katrina life.

"We all came together as young couples with kids on the way," Barbara Dupre said.

"Everybody was cutting their grass on Saturday mornings. It was like a competition," Gerald Dupre said.

"It was like a big family. It was a beautiful place to live and raise kids," she added.

Gerald Dupre is a retired construction worker and contractor who has done most of the post-storm rebuilding on his own.

"I don't know if we would be back if I couldn't do this work myself," he said.

"We wouldn't be back," she added.

Since March, the Dupres' routine includes almost daily visits to Home Depot and/or Lowe's.

"We try to take a day off. I'll say, 'Let's give it up today,'" she said of the grueling rebuilding.

"Some mornings it's hard to get started," he said.

Barbara Dupre hopes to be back living in the house by February, but her husband said she might get an early Christmas present.

"Maybe by Christmas we might be in. Not completely (finished with the work), but enough to move in," he said. "Just hoping to get out of that trailer."

If the neighborhood does not repopulate, the Dupres don't know how long they will tough it out.

"I guess the key is having patience," he said.

A pre-Katrina weekend vacation at their son's house in Atlanta turned into a six-month stay because of the storm.

"That's still another option," she said of possibly moving to Atlanta.

"A lot of that will hinge on what we can get for the house. If someone comes in and gives us the right price, I'll hand them the keys," he said. "I just don't want to give it away."

Barbara Dupre said home is where her heart is, even though that home was inundated by 7 feet of flood water for 13 days. About an inch of what she calls "Katrina water" remains trapped in a double-pane window in their den.

"I would like to stay. There is where all the memories are - 49 years," she said.

Gerald Dupre said it doesn't take much to make him content.

"All I need is a garage and a nice golf course," he said.

Their house has a separate garage, but the 18-hole golf tract down the street - Joseph M. Bartholomew Memorial Golf Course - remains closed since the storm and is terribly overgrown.

Hebron, who owns a limousine business and is a licensed tour guide, had 11 feet of water in his two-story house, including 2 feet upstairs. If the tourists don't return to New Orleans, the 55-year-old Hebron said he may have to leave the city.

"It's all about the economics to me right now. I'm not emotionally tied to anything," he said. "I'm looking for an exit strategy. I cut the emotional a long time ago. I got to cut the romance here. My bottom line is tourists."

Hebron said it makes no difference to him whether the city's population is 187,500 as the state claims or roughly 230,000 as the mayor contends. Hebron is concerned about the "visitor population."

"Tourists think that New Orleans is gone," he said.

Hebron said residents are not returning to Lakeview overnight either.

"Is it going to be two more years like I originally thought? Probably not," he said, predicting that it will be a longer process than that. "I thought Lakeview would be a lot further along."

OP-EDS/EDITORIALS

Op-Ed: Healthcare Reform Doomed Again

Louisiana Politics

October 18, 2006

By John Maginnis

Despite the tragic devastation of last year's hurricanes, hopes arose that, with a wiped-clean slate, the state could reform dysfunctional public institutions, primarily healthcare, instead of just rebuilding them.

Those hopes were stirred by two announcements in the spring. The the U.S. Veterans Administration and LSU Health Sciences would partner in replacing their two hospitals in downtown New Orleans by linking to a third building for joint non-medical support operations.

That was followed by a visit by U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt, who pledged to help the state develop a new healthcare model wherein public dollars "follow the patient." He envisioned moving away from the current two-tiered system--one for people with private insurance and one for the uninsured who depend on state hospitals--toward a single-tier plan that provides access to quality care for all.

With every visit to the state, he underscored the urgency of what could be a national demonstration project by reminding legislators and healthcare officials of exactly how many days he had left in office. He also hinted at being able to bend federal regulations to come up with extra federal dollars to make a new state plan work.

While some officials remained suspicious of the man from the federal government who said he was here to help, at his urging the state launched a new healthcare redesign collaborative to concentrate on the New Orleans area, where, if it worked, it could be adopted statewide.

After months of weekly meetings, the collaborative came up with the concept of giving poor and uninsured patients a "medical home"--usually a primary care clinic--for them to go to instead of the line at the charity hospital emergency room. At the medical home, patients' records would be electronically stored and their managed care directed toward a network of participating doctors and hospitals.

Some members of the collaborative found it odd that their discussions, directed by state health officials, never touched on how the planned LSU hospital would fit into the reform

plan. Indeed, they questioned if a big public hospital, with its need for a large share of limited federal healthcare dollars, was compatible with Secretary Leavitt's vision of a single-tier system in which the dollar followed the patient.

The secretary also had questions along those lines. At a recent meeting of the collaborative, Leavitt's representative "threw a stink bomb," in the words of the governor, by criticizing the group's draft plan as not going far enough to provide universal coverage and to flatten the two-tier system.

A week later, LSU officials sounded the alarm when they said federal officials had questioned the need for building a new teaching hospital to replace Big Charity, which they took as a veiled threat that the VA might pull out of the joint hospital venture.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco responded by declaring that the LSU hospital would be built with or without the VA. Her defiance and exasperation at "mixed messages" suggested she is ready to move ahead without Secretary Leavitt as well.

"If the man has a plan, let him put it on the table," said Blanco, who shouldn't hold her breath.

Meanwhile, her dispirited collaborative, struggling to meet Leavitt's demand for universal coverage, came up with a combination of the "medical homes" and government-subsidized insurance. To so cover the 100,000 uninsured in the New Orleans area alone would cost roughly \$300 million a year above current spending levels, and about \$1 billion more annually to go statewide.

Secretary Leavitt is not going to cover that, as he is only offering to help with some one-time transitional expenses. The Legislature, you can be sure, is not going to increase healthcare spending by a \$1 billion a year, or even \$100 million.

That leaves the governor's third healthcare reform commission in three years approaching another dead end, with fading hope of delivering on her 2003 campaign promise to overhaul and substantially improve the state hospital system. She is not totally to blame for the latest doomed effort, but, come next year, legislators and then voters won't be calling Michael Leavitt to account.

Editorial: Corps watchdogs are branching out

The Baton Rouge Advocate

October 16, 2006

It's not surprising that New Orleans is home to Levees.Org, a nonprofit advocacy group established to act as a watchdog over the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The work of the corps came under intense criticism after the New Orleans levee breaks prompted by Hurricane Katrina.

What is perhaps more interesting is that Levees.Org is opening satellite offices in Florida and California.

"The Corps of Engineers has completed many projects in Florida and California, with many more under construction," said Sandy Rosenthal, founder and director of Levees.Org. "However, there is no external independent panel to monitor corps activities and make it accountable. That's where Levees.Org comes in. We've seen what happens when no one is watching. We don't want these two states to experience some of the things we've seen in Louisiana due to corps design mistakes."

Joyce Levine, tapped to head Levees.Org's Florida office, said oversight of corps activities in Florida is critical. "For example, the corps is currently engaged in re-engineering the Everglades more to develop additional water supplies than to restore the water regime and ecosystem."

"California has its own unique levee concerns and water issues which are facilitated by the services of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers," said KC Costa, who was named to head Levees.Org's California office. "I believe that Levees.Org can serve a valuable purpose in informing, networking and protecting lives and irreplaceable water resources in California, most especially in the critical, low-lying delta areas."

In policy debates about corps projects, the public should have the opportunity to hear as many voices as possible, including those of organizations such as Levees.Org.

If the group succeeds in raising awareness of corps projects in other states - and their possible effects on lives and property - then the tragedy of Katrina will not have been in vain.

LTE: Insurance program charge criticized

The Baton Rouge Advocate

October 17, 2006

Somehow it doesn't seem right for an 82-year-old woman on low income to be forced to "donate" to the state's Citizens program. I've paid premiums for my home insurance all my life. And now with this extra charge, together with Allstate's increase, this is a 30 percent increase.

I have already had to cut back on charitable contributions because of the rising cost of necessities.

I understand from the newspaper that we will continue to pay Citizens for 10 years at a lower rate. I don't really expect to be around for 10 years. Should I expect to receive a bill at my grave site?

Gov. Kathleen Blanco, are you listening?

Fay Jones, Retired Secretary, Baton Rouge