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Published August 29, 2006

KATRINA RECOVERY »

New Orleans still suffering from inaction

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Nobody expected New Orleans to be fully recovered one year after Katrina. The task is just too big. But the pace of recovery in the Big Easy is so slow that it might be better to recast the city's informal slogan - the City That Care Forgot - to something more accurate: the City That's Been Forgotten.

That, at least, is how many of my fellow New Orleanians feel. We didn't expect to be back to normal by this point, but we hoped normal might at least be coming into view. Instead, many neighborhoods in the city remain entirely uninhabitable; key reconstruction decisions are on hold; city services - like trash removal in a city filled with trash - are infrequent and unreliable; and critical health and safety issues are brushed aside. In important ways, the failure to move with dispatch to clean and reconstruct New Orleans is as shocking an abdication of responsibility by federal and local officials as the bungling of the emergency preparedness efforts that transformed a natural disaster into a man-made cataclysm.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency — the acronym for which is used in these parts as a synonym for "foul," as in, "they've got that all FEMA'd up" — has been unsurprisingly slow in addressing continuing emergency needs of the City's displaced. Thousands of trailers that should have been in place within weeks of the storm took months to arrive in many neighborhoods. In St. Bernard Parish, 1,600 families are still waiting for such shelter. In the Ninth Ward, some residents — including the elderly — camp out in half-gutted homes without electricity.

The Army Corps of Engineers — the federal agency whose levees failed when construction mistakes were subjected to Katrina's fury — is planning to rebuild levees capable of withstanding storms no worse than Katrina, though nearly everyone agrees stronger storms are on the way. Despite the many promises President Bush has made to New Orleans, he has so far avoided any specifics on future levee protection.

The Environmental Protection Agency recently declared that its citywide work in the area is largely over — a conclusion that stands in stark contrast to EPA's own data showing disturbingly unhealthy levels of lead contamination in 14 neighborhoods across the city. From the beginning, EPA has downplayed public health worries about the brew of diesel fuel, petrochemicals and other toxics swept throughout the city by floodwaters. And rather than taking an aggressive approach to cleaning up the mess, it relied on time and the elements to handle the problem instead. Now, a year later, EPA is declaring victory and withdrawing, continuing to ignore and downplay ominous data as it goes. The result is a city still buried in debris, shorn of affordable housing, and, for these reasons, largely uninhabited.

Equally important, the federal government has shown only half-hearted interest in devising a plan for restoring the vast swaths of hurricane-dissipating wetland areas. For generations, Louisiana's coast was sliced and diced so that the nation could benefit from Louisiana's off-shore oil wealth. But getting Congress to plow a meaningful fraction of federal off-shore oil and gas revenue into coastal restoration has been like pulling teeth.

Efforts by the state and local government to lead a comprehensive city planning process collapsed in disagreement earlier this year. Finally, this July, government gave way to a local charity, the Greater New Orleans Foundation, which is now leading the planning process, supported by a multimillion-dollar grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The process began with a series of public meetings, and will lead to neighborhood designs crafted by teams of city planners, which in turn will be the basis for a citywide plan. The approach has its critics, but whatever else may be said, it at least promises to get things moving.

Impatience, it must be said, is in great abundance in New Orleans. Returning residents encountered a city in no way prepared for them. Residents have often been forced to fill in the gaps: improvising street signs in one neighborhood, and raising money to rebuild a public firehouse in another because they couldn't get homeowners' insurance without it. Also in great abundance is my city's gratitude for the thousands of individuals and organizations that have gutted houses, sent supplies, offered medical and legal assistance, and helped in myriad other ways.

As New Orleans enters Year Two, Post Katrina, residents hope for a rebuilding effort that doesn't rely quite so much on private citizens taking matters into their own hands.
