

Fairness in new New Orleans

By Xavier de Souza Briggs and Margery Austin Turner | October 5, 2005

PRESIDENT BUSH has acknowledged the tragic consequences of residential segregation and poverty concentration exposed by Hurricane Katrina and pledged that the *new* New Orleans will not repeat the mistakes of the past. But that promise could easily get lost in the scramble to make investment dollars flow and to win contracts.

Planners have to get much more specific about both the ends and the means of rebuilding to ensure the equitable redevelopment of poor communities. Many observers have raised the prospect that a rebuilt New Orleans will resemble a Las Vegas or Disneyland on the Gulf, dominated by the entertainment and tourism industry, favoring luxury housing, and planned by a group that even The Wall Street Journal labeled "the power elite." Clearly, that is an outcome to be avoided.

By equitable redevelopment, we mean something much more specific, however, including housing affordable to families at a wide range of income levels, measurably better public transportation and other job links, schools that are on track to succeed, healthcare access, a smart retail mix, business linkages to the regional economy, a viable tax base, and more mixed-income communities that reflect how urban America can and should function.

This is an ambitious vision, but not an unrealistic one. Since the early 1990s, for example, the federal government has allocated more than \$5.5 billion for a program called HOPE VI, turning distressed public housing projects into well-designed mixed-income communities with strong services driven by cost-effective public and private financing.

Physical redesign is not a panacea for poverty or racial discrimination, but we can rebuild better. Before the storm, more than four of 10 poor blacks in New Orleans lived in neighborhoods that were 40 percent or more poor. The average black public school student in the city attended a school where 87 percent of the children were poor. And the city was among a very few in America where racial segregation actually worsened during the 1990s.

An extensive body of social science research concludes that racially segregated and high-poverty communities undermine the life chances of families and children, cutting off access to mainstream social and economic opportunities. We must avoid resegregating New Orleans's poor and minority residents in isolated and distressed neighborhoods. But the alternative cannot be simply displacing them through land grabs that "gild the ghetto,"

as the most exclusionary urban renewal schemes of the '60s did.

The active involvement of New Orleans residents -- along with business owners and professional planners -- is a prerequisite for equitable redevelopment. Urban planning and other fields offer concrete models for using 21st-century information and communication technologies as tools of inclusion -- tools for organizing a maze of issues into agendas that groups can tackle, demystifying development choices and jargon, simulating a range of development scenarios, projecting results, and supporting citizen deliberation and voting to get the best and most legitimate ideas off the ground. Negotiated "community benefit agreements" and other tools help ensure equitable outcomes, but a strong process is key to ensure equitable decision-making. Both are crucial, given the deep divisions and mistrust so evident in the aftermath of the storm.

Beyond rebuilding smarter and more equitably, we need to help families who choose to resettle elsewhere secure a better life as well as thrive, not just survive, in the president's words. Those families should receive the kind of housing search assistance and support -- proven programs for relocating, adapting, and getting ahead -- that have benefited thousands of very-low-income families, most of them racial minorities, leaving distressed public housing projects.

We have decades of lessons on what it takes to make these "assisted housing mobility" programs work, and refugee resettlement programs hold important lessons as well. We must also prevent thousands of new, temporary housing units from becoming isolated barracks for the worst off.

Wherever they may settle, the families who were hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina should be able to find hope as well as opportunity in its aftermath -- but they will succeed only if there's smart policy to go with the promises.

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