Some wondered if storm’s destruction in N.O. meant a clean slate

Katrina rebuilding debate included full-scale remaking of public schools, housing and Charity system

By Gordon Russell

It was standing-room-only in the big hall at the Sheraton, and the mood was tense.

Four months had passed since Hurricane Katrina and the devastation that followed, and a committee of civic leaders put together by Mayor Ray Nagin was set to make recommendations about how the city ought to go about rebuilding. A map that was front and center on that day’s newspaper showed green dots covering a handful of neighborhoods that might be converted to parkland.

“A completely different way,” Businessman Jimmy Reiss said in his comments to The Journal.

Perhaps the first inkling that a full-scale do-over might be in store for New Orleans came when the mayor himself appeared on the front page of The Wall Street Journal in June, which depicted the storm, with much of the city still underwater.

Olshansky, an urban planning professor at the University of Illinois who wrote a book in his comments to The Journal, left the impression that the city’s well-heeled, white elite wanted a white, wealthy city.

Nagin would ultimately relocate them.

Not that the idea was be- loved in the largely white, middle-class neighborhood of Lakeview, where a building moratorium was proposed. After Bender declared war on the plan, Job Bruneau, the head of Lakeview’s civic association, got up to the microphone and told Nagin, “We want to be able to go down to City Hall and get permits. We have the means to help ourselves, so don’t get in our way.”

Jeff Thomas, a lawyer who wound up working in the city’s recovery office, said the “Big Reimagining” of New Orleans was never realistic in the first place and not just because of the opposition.

“The idea of shrinking the footprint was just a nonstarter under constitutional law,” he said. “It would have required using eminent domain on thousands of properties.”

With the forces of Big Planning in retreat after the Sher- ton meeting, New Orleans was set about putting its city back together, mostly like it was.

“Anyone looking at the history of other urban disasters would not have been surprised. Bob Olshansky, an urban planning professor at the University of Illinois who wrote a book on the post-storm planning in New Orleans, said that while the devastation that followed Katrina, some thought New Orleans should rebuild from a clean slate. That point of view did not win the day.

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catastrophes "always provide some opportunities for improvement...most things end up being rebuilt as they were."

"I think perhaps some people believed that the city could take the opportunity to not rebuild the lowest areas and to cluster developments to save money," Olshansky wrote in an essay. "But it was never realistic to think of the city as a blank slate, because disaster-struck cities never were: land tenure, social networks, and memories prevent that.

Housing overhaul

Still, even as the footprint debate raged in the foreground, other changes were unfolding that would fundamentally reconfigure the city. Housing issues had been debated well before Katrina formed off the coast of Florida. City officials and advocates with large populations of poor people — were increasingly concerned that these failed urban systems needed radical fixes. The thinking was that large public housing complexes were too damaged — and poorly performing school systems needed radical overhauls. Designated health care systems that had become incubators of urban ills, rang out to conclusions that if liberals really cared about kids, they'd support market-rate apartments free from the central-office meddling and incompetence often blamed for city schools' woes — were increasingly seen as the best hope.

In 2003, the Legislature had created something called the Recovery School District, a state agency that would be a repository for the city's worst schools. But bigger changes portended. In 2005, the local district's authority was further usurped when the district's shaky financial controls, including contracting and some personnel decisions, were handed over to a contractor. By the time Katrina struck, five of the city's roughly 130 schools had been transferred to the control of the new recovery district and had been converted to charters.

All those floods, with the entire city evacuated and most schools damaged, the Legislature passed Act 35, which suddenly put about four-fifths of the district's schools into the RSD, with the idea that most would bechartered as well. The School Board, meanwhile, fired all of its employees — roughly 7,000 of them — and announced it was shutting down for the 2005-06 school year. The RSD overlapped the latter decision, opening a maelstrom of lawsuits, most of them charter, after the Christmas break.

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Charity makeover

The storm also gave officials a long-desired window to build a new public hospital to replace Charity, the halting, outmoded edifice completed in 1938. As with schools and public housing, the plan was aimed partly at a physical upgrade for a building seen as anachronistic, but it also entailed a philosophical shift. The idea was to rethink Louisiana's system of charity hospitals for the poor, both privatizing their management and also trying to discourage uninsured patients from using the hospital for basic medical care, rather than emergencies. At the same time, there was heady talk of creating a world-class bio-

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Housing Authority of New Orleans complexes. So while the River Garden neighborhood had recovered from what might have been anecdotally seen as doomed in the 1980s, as many market-rate apartments as public housing units — might have been spruced up, it was difficult to measure to what extent itsills had simply been shuffled around. Similar, if less ambitious overhauls were soon undertaken at Guste, Florida, Desire and Fischer housing projects respectively.

The floods presented a bigger opportunity. The remaining "Big Four" developments — Lafitte, St. Bernard, C.J. Peete and B.W. Cooper, which together contained about 60 percent of the remaining public housing in the city — all received some damage, though its extent was hotly debated. Residents were not allowed to return to their apartments. Because of corruption and chronic mismanagement, the time was under federal control. And nine months after the storm, Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Alphonso Jackson announced that the $1.16 billion in the four complexes were too damaged to be repaired and that the federal government would demolish and rebuild them. As the debate raged on the end of the story — there were lawsuits; protests and a rancor.

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As the debate raged on, the IberVILLE complex, the last of the large traditional public housing developments remaining, has been undergoing its own transformation.

Act 35 opens door

For years, the debate over urban public education had boiled down to this: Liberals, often seen as working hand in glove with teachers unions, would argue that failing urban school districts simply needed more resources. Conservatives would counter that if liberals really cared about kids, they'd support vouchers that would allow inner-city kids attending lousy schools to go to private schools — usually parochial ones — instead.

Advocates for years had been casting about for a Clintonian "third way" that would challenge the conventional wisdom about public education. Autonomous charter schools - free from the central-office meddling and incompetence often blamed for city schools' woes — were increasingly seen as the best hope.

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