

New Orleans, USA

# Public congresses and citizen participation in disaster zones

Cynthia Hedge-Morrell

## Summary

This case study examines the challenges of large scale citizen-led planning in the aftermath of a natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. As an alternative to a top-down planning process residents collectively took part in formulating a plan to rebuild their city. Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, recently elected Councillor at the time, tells the story.

## Background

In 2005 New Orleans was hit by a horrific natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the levees and floodwalls protecting the City of New Orleans. The levees and floodwalls collapsed due to flawed design and construction, the erosion of earth and overtopping by storm surge. As a result of the failures over 1,600 people were killed, one million were displaced and thousands of citizens lost their homes and possessions. In the aftermath of the hurricane the city and the spirit of its people were devastated, yet it was vital to empower the citizens to rise-up and give voice to the rebuilding of their city and their lives. The constituents of District D rose to the occasion and pioneered the first neighbourhood planning process that set out a blueprint for recovery and community rebuilding in the City of New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina.



The first neighbourhood charrette at the Greek Community Centre with participants from Ponchartrain Park.

## What happened and why was it significant?

While the city was still under water, the residents of Pontchartrain Park, a historic community built primarily for professional African Americans, met to prepare the groundwork of rebuilding this fifty-year-old subdivision. At that initial meeting in Baton Rouge, a phone tree was established, e-mail contacts were recorded and an internet search was done to locate other members of the community scattered across other states. With similar concerns, several other neighbourhood associations contacted the City Council seeking information regarding regrouping and rebuilding, such as the *Gentilly After Katrina Group*, which became the *Gentilly Civic Improvement Association* (GCIA). Today, GCIA serves as an umbrella organisation to nineteen-neighbourhood associations in District D including Pontchartrain Park.

Members of the GCIA bombarded the City Council with questions and concerns that needed to be addressed. In response, department heads from the City of New Orleans and state and federal intergovernmental agencies were brought in for a meeting with residents. All their questions were placed in boxes before the relevant officials each of whom answered 10 questions during the course of the evening. All the outstanding issues were followed up after the event. The collaboration and cooperation shown at this meeting led to the first District Town Hall meeting held at City Hall, where the 'Charrette' concept of planning was presented and agreed as the method by which all citizens would participate in the rebuilding of the city. This method involves an open planning process, held over several consecutive days. Over 500 displaced residents travelled to attend this meeting, which was structured as an open dialogue between residents and councillors. After this meeting, Pontchartrain Park residents made the commitment to participate in this unfamiliar process by organising the first Charrette in the City of New Orleans.

Support and funding for the 'Charrette' came from the business sector, private industry and neighbourhood communities, including the nationally known facilitator, Burt Stitt. He enabled Pontchartrain Park residents to organise themselves and decide what issues

were pertinent to rebuilding their communities. Finally, at the 'Charrette', he took residents through a step-by-step exercise to formulate a plan that was consensus and goal driven. He facilitated spirited discussions on quality of life issues that allowed residents to vent their frustrations and then focus on moving forward with plans to rebuild their neighbourhood.

The residents were fully engaged in the planning process. However, the issue of returning to a city whose levee system had been destroyed and compromised was very daunting. Many residents were still afraid to come back because of inadequate flood protection. In an effort to understand why the levees breached and how to build stronger levees, so that this catastrophe would never happen again, a delegation was sent from New Orleans to the Netherlands to learn firsthand about the technology of levee protection. From this experience, we brought back new found knowledge and understanding about the technical aspects of the levee breaches and what is needed to secure the city, and also about the importance of empowering individuals to collectively take the destiny of their communities into their own hands.

The trip to the Netherlands and its findings were the impetus in bringing together people impacted by the breached levees and the Army Corps of Engineers. Since the initial meeting between these groups, there is now a system of regular meetings to discuss the rebuilding effort within the community with the Army who are undertaking the work.

Meanwhile the City Council was working to implement a different plan of action. The Mayor had already instituted the Bring Back New Orleans Commission, which consisted of several subcommittees assigned to address specific areas of need, such as, education, culture, and infrastructure. This Commission operated on two premises: (1) to convert severely damaged neighbourhoods into green spaces and (2) to implement 'Sequential Investment by Neighbourhoods', which would have targeted funding in the undamaged areas before repairing heavily damaged areas. The citizens of New Orleans vehemently rejected this plan as it would have adversely affected the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans by reducing the

city's footprint by excluding a large population destroyed by floodwater.

My role as Councilwoman for New Orleans meant that I challenged the priorities set out by the Bring Back New Orleans Commission. In response to the constituents' request, my role as Councilwoman for New Orleans led me to challenge the priorities set out by the Bring Back New Orleans Commission. St Martin and Brown – New Orleans born architects – volunteered their services and met with neighbourhood groups to develop local blueprints for each area. From that collaboration, in March 2006 the New Orleans City Council contracted with Lambert Advisory of Miami and SHEDO of New Orleans. Lambert Advisory/SHEDO shared roles as project manager and coordinators to a team of consultants made of seven firms, which served as neighborhood planners, and were assigned to assist 49 neighborhoods flooded by Hurricane Katrina and the failed levees. Lambert Advisory/SHEDO, whose mission and vision were consistent with the City Council in assuring the right for everyone to return, became the guiding agency to assist in the development of citizen driven neighborhood revitalization plans. From my position as budget chair and with full support of my colleagues, the planning and project management companies Lambert Advisory/SHEDO and St Martin-Brown were funded \$2.9 million to be used for areas affected by more than two feet of floodwater. Neighbourhoods that had been inundated by floodwaters developed plans to address their specific needs in terms of infrastructure, capital improvement and economic development. Community Block Grant monies were also used to fund this initiative.

In order to consolidate the various neighbourhood planning processes, the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) was established. This plan was the largest citywide community based project held in our state. We engaged over 3000 citizens in this project with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Greater New Orleans Foundation and America Speaks. I was appointed by the Mayor to be a member of the Community Support Organization, responsible for overseeing the progress of UNOP. The result was that 73 neighbourhood plans will form the

basis of a city-wide master plan and a new comprehensive zoning plan. This planning process empowered constituents throughout the City of New Orleans to rebuild neighbourhoods and resurrect their lives.

## What were the challenges?

### **1. Working as a Community with the Army Corps.**

Initially there was a lot of anger and hostility towards the army engineers, who were blamed by the community for the collapse of the levee system. It took time to persuade people to work with the army and to act as a check on their work by making sure insufficient levees are never built again. This has led to regular meetings between residents and the army in all the different areas. These events are advertised in schools and other central locations and are open to all.

### **2. Working without sufficient funds or authority to make changes.**

While the City Councillors are the local legislators, and many have worked with the residents to determine their priorities, they initially worked without direct funds from central government. This has meant that while the planning process has been community-led, putting these plans into practice depends on the federal government which means following their rules and regulations. This slows the whole process down.

### **3. Avoiding exploitation by developers.**

Organisations and individuals, such as architects and developers, have come from other states in order to capitalise on the devastation. They want to rebuild the city in ways that are insensitive to New Orleans' rich history and culture, and often ignore resident's own wishes.

### **4. Including displaced residents in the process of rebuilding.**

Lack of affordable housing and high rents have meant that citizens who do not own property have been forced out of the city. This has made the process of getting all residents to fully participate very challenging; it was not until the Unified Planning Process that there were sufficient funds to travel and work with residents relocated outside of the City.

## What were the lessons?

### **1. Citizen participation has led to a faster recovery of the city.**

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina the federal government was slow to act, leaving people with the only option of working with their neighbours to get things done. People now have a willingness to work together and to share resources between neighbourhoods.

### **2. Citizens need to act as a check on government power.**

The importance of acting as a check

on government has been impressed upon the community after the levees broke. Instead of just relying on reports, citizens need to be an active check on government to ensure that they are well protected. This devastation has made citizens see the need for governments to be held accountable for their actions.

### **3. Once the process of looking at one aspects of the city began, this sparked the need to address every aspect of life in the city that was not performing well.**

Prior to Hurricane Katrina citizens knew about the problems of education, crime and insufficient hospitals, but there was a lack of willingness to take responsibility for fixing these problems. Through the rebuilding process, citizens have talked about and sought solutions for the long-standing problems in the community and tried to resolve all issues, not merely those affected by the hurricane.

### **4. Other countries and organisations can teach citizens how to better understand their own situation.**

The process of visiting the Netherlands and obtaining information, new knowledge and understanding which can then be passed on to other citizens is very empowering. It was reassuring to discover that we did not need to 'reinvent the wheel' but could adapt this learning to use in our own situation.