Rebuilding New Orleans

How Large-Scale Citizen Engagement Laid the Foundation for Success

unop The Unified New Orleans Plan

AMERICASPEAKS
Engaging Citizens in Governance

The task of rebuilding New Orleans is an enormous one. This is the story of the power of citizen engagement to bring back a devastated community's sense of wholeness, renew its hope, and help it forge a path to the future.

After a number of unsuccessful attempts, New Orleans has approved a blueprint for rebuilding that finally unites the city behind common priorities. The Unified New Orleans Plan, developed in just five months, brought thousands of citizens together with planners and officials in an unprecedented grassroots effort that engaged the full diversity of the city.

The national non-profit America*Speaks* played a critical role in securing robust and diverse participation in the Unified Plan. Citizens living in New Orleans – and those dispersed by the storm to 21 other cities – were brought together to participate in a truly city-wide conversation. The process ensured the public's role was substantive, representative, and intrinsic to the final product.

After Katrina, the Challenge of Rebuilding a City

Hurricane Katrina shattered the city of New Orleans and exposed many of the deep racial and economic disparities this nation has long ignored. Much of the city's infrastructure was decimated: more than 70% of housing was damaged and entire neighborhoods were virtually destroyed; schools, hospitals and police stations were shut down. Almost 100,000 jobs were lost and, 18 months later, more than half of the city's population has not returned.

In the aftermath, plans to rebuild New Orleans faced a ravaged infrastructure, financial losses of enormous scale, decision-makers scrambling in crisis mode, and a citizenry whose trust in government had been abused. City officials' early planning efforts were met with anger and protest as the community struggled with the challenges of distributing resources and reviving an entire city.

The Unified New Orleans Plan: A Truly City-Wide Conversation

In the spring of 2006, officials began to conceptualize a plan to address these challenges. That summer, following months of intense negotiation, the Mayor, the City Council, and the City Planning Commission endorsed a new planning process. The foundation-funded Unified New Orleans Plan would be run by the Community Support Foundation and overseen by a community advisory board comprised of neighborhood representatives and delegates from the Mayor's office, the City Council, and the City Planning Commission.

The Unified Plan would address all city-wide systems, tackling infrastructure needs like housing, flood protection, transportation and public services. It would also produce 13 district-level plans with recovery priorities for the city's neighborhoods. Unlike earlier planning work, it would incorporate the results of all previous efforts.

The urgent need to revive the city left a remarkably short time frame for this process: the city-wide and 13 district plans were to be completed – with full community participation – in less than five months.

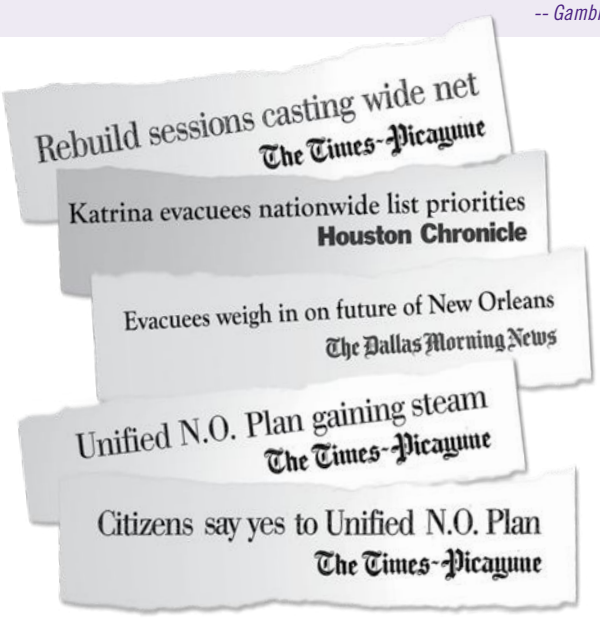
Clear, Collective Voice is Heard

At the heart of the Unified Plan process were two public forums unprecedented in their size and scope. The "Community Congresses" engaged 4,000 citizens across the country in developing collective recovery priorities for the city. With key decision-makers listening, citizens discussed how to ensure safety from future flooding, empower residents to rebuild safe and stable neighborhoods, provide incentives and housing so people could return, and establish sustainable, equitable public services.

At the end of the deliberations, 92% of participants agreed that the Unified Plan should go forward. Critically, this approval rating represented the collective view of the city's citizenry because participants reflected pre-Katrina New Orleans. 64% at the December Community Congress were African American; 25% had annual household income below $20,000; and, they participated not only at home, but in cities across the diaspora.

"Through courage, advocacy and consistent participation, New Orleanians have created blueprints aimed at ensuring a complete and equitable recovery. The UNOP report reflects citywide priorities that were vetted by the citizens themselves. Truly, this is the people's plan."

-- Gambit Weekly



Powerful Results

The Unified New Orleans Plan process, and its unprecedented levels of citizen engagement, yielded powerful results in three ways:

"That's an amazing number of yea votes in this consensus-starved city."

-- New Orleans City Business

- **Established the credibility needed for real action.** The full range of officials responsible for rebuilding New Orleans participated in the Unified Plan process and emerged, with citizens, as "co-owners" of a concrete action plan. The combination of high levels of citizen endorsement and decision-maker ownership meant the plan would have the needed credibility and authority to move forward.

- **Built a constituency committed to the work.** The process built a citizenry energized to both stay involved and hold officials accountable for outcomes. 93% of participants at the final Community Congress committed to remaining engaged.

- **Helped restore hope.** The Unified Plan restored a sense of hope, connection and extended community for the people of New Orleans, especially those in the diaspora.

"I think the Community Congress has done more to bring credibility to the table than all of the little individual meetings that people go to. It's brought the people who were displaced into the process. The Community Congress reminded me of true democracy, like the town hall meeting. That, to me, is democracy as it was originally visioned."

– Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge Morrell

The Mechanics of Real, Representative Citizen Engagement

America*Speaks* has been engaging citizens in deliberations about the most important public decisions in their lives for more than a decade. To ensure the Community Congresses had representative participation, America*Speaks* partnered with a wide array of grassroots organizations, service providers and leaders in diaspora cities across the country. Registrants received pre-recorded calls from the Mayor; Public Service Announcements featured celebrities like Wynton Marsalis; and free meals, childcare, transportation, and translation into Spanish and Vietnamese enabled participation for many who might otherwise have been left out.

America*Speaks*' 21st Century Town Meeting® methodology used networked laptops and individualized keypad polling to support facilitated, small-group discussions at diverse tables. These discussions fed into large-group sharing and decision-making. Interactive television connected participants in New Orleans with those in Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta. At the December Community Congress, participants in 16 other cities viewed[1] the program through a webcast and submitted their views in real-time over the Internet. Public television viewers in New Orleans were able to follow the programming from their homes. At day's end, the citizens' collective priorities were provided in writing to every participant.

Unified New Orleans Plan Approved

In June 2007, the New Orleans City Council and Louisiana Recovery Authority approved the Unified New Orleans Plan. Thanks to the hard work of the people of New Orleans, there is now a unified strategy for rebuilding the districts, neighborhoods and city. The $14.5 billion plan anticipates spending about $4 billion in the first two years on infrastructure, utility repairs, schools and flood protection. The first steps in implementing the plan will use $216 million in mostly federal funds, announced in October 2007. The city is preparing for the job: a renowned disaster recovery planner is overseeing rebuilding and the city's One New Orleans Community Recovery & Resources website provides progress updates. In Spring 2007, AmericaSpeaks convened city employees in a discussion about aligning the city's activities with the recovery plan. The Community Congresses resulted in a comprehensive strategy for the rebirth of a great American city.

> *"The Unified New Orleans Plan represents a citizen-driven recovery vision for the entire city of New Orleans which has been developed with unprecedented participation and representation from every part of the city including displaced citizens."*
>
> *- Louisiana Recovery Authority*

About America*Speaks*

Founded in 1995, AmericaSpeaks gives citizens an authentic voice in local, regional and national decision-making. Using innovative deliberative tools such as the 21st Century Town Meeting®, AmericaSpeaks has engaged more than 130,000 people and facilitated large-scale citizen participation in issues such as the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site; statewide health care reform in California; and the national childhood obesity epidemic.

[1] Austin, TX; Charlotte, NC; Chicago, IL; Denver, CO; Detroit, MI; Jackson, MS; Jacksonville, FL; Los Angeles, CA; Memphis, TN; St. Paul, MN; New York, NY; Princeton, NJ; San Antonio, TX; San Francisco, CA; Seattle, WA; and Washington, DC.