

**THE ROLE OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION
IN LEGITIMATING
THE UNIFIED NEW ORLEANS PLAN***

ABIGAIL WILLIAMSON**
PH.D. CANDIDATE IN PUBLIC POLICY
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

MARCH 21, 2007
REVISED OCTOBER 1, 2007

* This research was generously supported with funds from the Case Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Fund, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation. Thanks also to Professor Archon Fung of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government for his counsel in developing the research questions and interview guide for this project.

** Author contact information: Abby_Williamson@ksgphd.harvard.edu, 617-750-5621.

INTRODUCTION

Fifteen months after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, on January 31, 2007, a team of planners submitted the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) to the City Planning Commission. Following the demise of earlier planning efforts, UNOP represents five months of intensive citizen engagement with expert planning teams, made possible through funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund. From its inception, UNOP's designers and implementers insisted on widespread public participation in the plan's development. Such efforts included a citizen and leader liaison board with open biweekly sessions, four rounds of interactive meetings in 13 planning districts, and three citywide Community Congresses that brought together from 300 to 2500 residents of New Orleans and its hurricane diaspora. This report considers the extent to which these public participation processes, and particularly the second Community Congress, influenced local leaders' views of the credibility and substance of the Unified New Orleans Plan. In particular, I focus on evidence from 20 interviews with New Orleans community leaders, conducted primarily during the week leading up to the third Community Congress, which took place on January 20, 2007.

I find that the second Community Congress, conducted by AmericaSpeaks, an organization specializing in large-scale public engagement, overcame significant obstacles to raise the credibility of UNOP in the eyes of public leaders. By bringing together a representative group of citizen participants and enabling meaningful discussion across lines of difference, Community Congress II engendered "buy-in" from both the public and their leaders. On the whole, leaders were less clear about the role that public input played in influencing the substance of the plan. Looking back at previous planning processes, most community leaders felt that UNOP had managed to balance two crucial components in ways that earlier plans did not. Namely, leaders saw UNOP as an effective marriage between citizen engagement and planner expertise, and believed that Community Congress II contributed to this balance. Looking to the future, leaders expressed hope that UNOP would pass quickly and New Orleans could attract the funds necessary to implement the plan. Some leaders hoped that citizens would continue to build on the grassroots energies developed during UNOP and earlier planning efforts, while some city staff preferred that participation in New Orleans return to traditional channels such as the public hearing.

The full report proceeds as follows. After a description of my research questions and methods, I describe what led New Orleans to embark on UNOP, its third attempt at city planning since Hurricane Katrina. Rather than developing a historical account of events, I focus on the differing perceptions of the various parties involved and how they shifted over time. This analysis introduces the complex context in which New Orleanians related to UNOP. Next, I turn more specifically to public participation in the UNOP process, considering the role of various events, particularly the December 2, 2006, Community Congress II. Finally, I report on my informants' views of how UNOP compared to earlier planning processes, as well as the plan's prospects for successful implementation. In closing, I consider the future of civic engagement in New Orleans, as well as interesting unanswered questions this research raises, which deserve attention in future work.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGN

At root, this research project considers how the intervention of a large-scale citizen participation process, such as AmericaSpeaks' Community Congress, impacts local leaders' views of the credibility and substance of planning efforts. In some ways, the UNOP process offered an ideal setting in which to probe this question. The city had already experienced two earlier planning processes with different levels of citizen participation and outcomes, which offered ready comparisons to UNOP.¹ On the other hand, the scale of the devastation and the complexity of the political environment in New Orleans offer circumstances that are not readily generalizable to other planning processes. At the very least, considering the role of public participation in the UNOP process enables a better understanding of the peculiarities of the New Orleans experience. In addition, it generates interesting hypotheses about public leaders' responses to citizen engagement, which can be tested in other planning processes.

To understand the role of public participation in the UNOP planning process, I conducted 20 interviews with a diverse range of New Orleans leaders. The interviews probed three main topics. First, I asked questions to ascertain the informant's views of the legitimacy and usefulness of the UNOP process as a whole, as well as how and why these views evolved over time. I also asked informants about other supporters and opponents of UNOP, and the extent to which these parties' views changed over the course of the process. Second, I asked informants for their views on the role of the Community Congresses in the overall UNOP process, focusing particularly on the value of various innovations, such as the scale, technology, intensive outreach, and inclusion of the hurricane diaspora through telecasts. In this section of the interview, I attempted to probe how leaders thought that Community Congress II contributed to the credibility and substance of UNOP. Finally, I concluded with questions that asked the informant to compare the UNOP process to earlier post-hurricane planning processes, in terms of credibility, substance, and prospects for implementation. The interview guide is included in Appendix A.

Fifteen of the interviews took place in person from January 17-20, 2007, in New Orleans. Five additional interviews occurred over the phone between January 23, 2007 and February 11, 2007. These semi-structured interviews ranged from 15 to 90 minutes and averaged roughly 45 minutes. If the informant agreed, I recorded the in-person interviews using a digital recorder and also took detailed field notes. Most informants chose to speak for attribution, although three informants asked that I not use their names and disguise their identities. A description of informants is included in Appendix B.

In selecting informants, I purposively sampled a demographically diverse group of New Orleans leaders with affiliations to all of the major organizations involved in managing and approving UNOP. Six informants sat on the Community Support Organization, the citizen and agency-liaison oversight group for UNOP. Four were members of the state-appointed Louisiana Recovery Authority, which instigated UNOP. Three were members of the Community Support Foundation Board, the board with responsibility over the UNOP process. Three were City Council members and one was a member of a Councilman's staff. One sat on a city-appointed committee and one was a staff member of the City Planning Commission. Two were members of the Mayor's senior staff. Finally, one informant was a

¹ A fourth planning process also took place at the initiative of the federal government. From September 2005 until August 2006, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) conducted an Emergency Support Function (ESF-14) plan in the Orleans parish and other hurricane-damaged areas. While the planning process employed as many as 325 and included a nationwide, participatory "Louisiana Planning Day" in January 2006, the resulting document has not been a major part of the city's planning debates. (Horne, Jedidiah and Brendan Nee. "An Overview of Post-Katrina Planning in New Orleans," unpublished manuscript. October 18, 2006. Available at www.nolaplans.com. Accessed March 11, 2007.)

UNOP planner and another was a local media observer. In total, my informants included 10 African-Americans, 9 whites, and one multiracial informant.

Of the 20 informants, eight were initially so ambivalent about the UNOP process that they seriously considered not participating. The others were either instigators of the plan or individuals whose varied degrees of skepticism did not constrain them from active participation. I did not speak with any of the most outspoken critics of the plan. I also did not formally interview any members of the general public, though I did participate in Community Congress III as a facilitator of a table of seven citizens who discussed the UNOP plan.

On the whole, my informants included many of the most important players in the UNOP process. A more complete sample of informants would probably include additional planners involved in the process and some of the plan's more outspoken critics. While my sample did include three informants who participated on the Commission or committees of the earlier Bring New Orleans Back plan and several City Councilmembers and community leaders who participated in the Lambert plan, a more complete sample would have included influential New Orleanians that participated in these earlier planning processes, but did not play an active role in UNOP.

One other limiting factor relates to the timing of my interviews. Rather than interviewing the same informants at several points in time, my research questions asked informants to reflect back on the process during last weeks before the plan was released. Moreover, most of my interviews took place prior to Community Congress III, the third major citywide participation event. The timing of my interviews was beneficial in terms of having informants reflect on the *process* of UNOP, but, as the report will discuss, many informants were not yet prepared to discuss the *substance* of UNOP, prior to the plan's release. A more complete exploration of this topic would include follow-up interviews at a later date, perhaps when the various agencies have completed their vetting of the plan.

HURRICANE RECOVERY PLANNING PROCESSES

The Unified New Orleans Plan represents the third major planning process New Orleans has undertaken since Hurricane Katrina struck on August 29, 2005. The first process, known as Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB), began a month after the hurricane when Mayor C. Ray Nagin appointed an elite, 17-member commission to oversee a team of external planning experts. BNOB staggered to a halt when it became bogged down in controversies in the lead up to the April 2006 mayoral election. Impatient for recovery to begin, the City Council launched its own planning process for the city's flood-damaged neighborhoods, which became known as the Lambert Plan, after the planning firm that produced it. Yet neither of these plans succeeded in developing the necessary credibility and substance to serve as New Orleans' comprehensive disaster recovery plan. UNOP was developed to fill this void. In the paragraphs that follow, I focus on the genesis of UNOP, reviewing earlier events from the perspective of the various parties involved with UNOP, namely the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA), the Mayor's Office, the New Orleans City Council, the City Planning Commission (CPC), and the general public.

The Louisiana Recovery Authority's UNOP Perspective

In October 2005, Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco established the Louisiana Recovery Authority and charged it with overseeing the rebuilding of Louisiana's Gulf Coast region following hurricanes Katrina and Rita. She named her then chief-of-staff, Andy Kopplin, as its Executive Director, and appointed a prominent 30-member board to guide the agency. Dr. Norman Francis, president of Xavier University and a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Honor, chairs the LRA board. According to Dr. Francis, one of the main functions of the LRA was "encouraging the respective parishes and cities about the need to plan as a prerequisite for receipt of CBDG [Community Development Block Grant] funds." After watching one failed planning process in New Orleans and seeing efforts stall around the April Mayoral elections, the LRA began raising funds for a comprehensive New Orleans planning process in the spring of 2006.

Already, relations between the city and state governments were stressed due to competition over federal redevelopment funds. In launching the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) planning process, Mayor Nagin had hoped to circumvent the state and receive federal funding for New Orleans directly.² While the Governor's office and the Bush administration faced off over responsibilities in the aftermath of the hurricane, Mayor Nagin had a helpful connection to the President, in the form of BNOB commission member Joe Canizaro, a top Bush fundraiser. When the Mayor's plan foundered, however, hopes of New Orleans receiving direct federal funds dissolved. In the transition between outgoing FEMA director Michael Brown and his successor, even the \$7.5 million in planning funds promised for New Orleans mysteriously dried up. At this point, Canizaro and some former BNOB colleagues approached the LRA in hopes that they would cover or raise the \$7.5 million necessary to complete a comprehensive recovery plan that included input from all New Orleans neighborhoods.³

Thus, the LRA approached the Rockefeller Foundation, which agreed to provide \$3.5 million for a comprehensive citywide planning process. In partnership with Rockefeller, the LRA agreed to house the monies at the Greater New Orleans Foundation (GNOF), where a Rockefeller representative and a staff of planners from Concordia Architecture and Planning would coordinate what became UNOP. GNOF provided an additional \$1 million, as did the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, to round out the plan's budget. UNOP would consist of 13 district planning processes led by independent firms, along with a citywide planning process led by a team from the Louisiana firms of Villavaso & Associates and Henry Consulting. Six former and current members of the GNOF board would oversee the process as the Community Support Foundation Board (CSF). A citizen and agency-liaison group, known as the Community Support Organization, would hold biweekly meetings and monitor overall progress.

By late July 2006, the process the LRA had set in motion was ready to move forward. At Rockefeller's insistence, however, the LRA needed to have the various parties that would eventually approve UNOP (the Mayor, the City Council, the City Planning Commission, the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and the Community Support Foundation Board) sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that recognized and endorsed the process. Dr. Francis describes the resulting three-week struggle as a series of "U.N. negotiations," led on the LRA's behalf by board member David Voelker.

At this stage, UNOP faced particular opposition from the Mayor's Office and the City Council. From the LRA's perspective, UNOP was stepping in to provide leadership where the city had failed to do so.

² Interview 10. (Where I do not directly identify the speaker, I will cite interviews with the number by which they are listed in Appendix B.)

³ Horne and Nee, 2006.

Dr. Francis reports, “I think the UNOP plan ... rescued a responsibility that the city and its governing body owed to the people.” From the perspective of the Mayor and the City Council, however, the LRA was telling city officials how to run their own city and replicating on-going planning processes. In the next two sections, I describe early objections to UNOP from the Mayor and the City Council.

The Mayor’s UNOP Perspective

By the summer of 2006, Mayor Nagin had come through his own citywide planning process, the Bring New Orleans Back plan, with his political career barely intact. Bring New Orleans Back was an almost entirely top-down process, led mostly by influential city leaders with the assistance of planning experts external to New Orleans. The BNOB committees did hold some forums and interview New Orleans residents about their preferences, but at the time they were constructing the plan, pre-Katrina residents were scattered all over the country and planners did not take on the massive task of engaging these disparate citizens. The BNOB commission saw its work as a precursor to a broader, more participatory neighborhood planning effort, which it proposed in its final report.⁴ The neighborhood planning effort never moved forward under BNOB’s auspices because the plan’s controversial proposals stalled its progress.

When the Commission released its findings at the end of January 2006, they were met with a firestorm of public opposition. New Orleanians particularly objected to the proposals, developed by an expert panel from the Urban Land Institute, to turn some vulnerable, damaged neighborhoods into green space and to shrink the city’s “footprint,” a term for its overall physical size. Some of New Orleans’ low-income African-American residents, who had been scattered by the storm, felt that BNOB represented an attempt by racist elites to prevent them from returning to the city. With the postponed Mayoral elections looming in April 2006, Mayor Nagin quickly distanced himself from the plan.

Looking back, a top aide says that Mayor Nagin backed away from the BNOB plan primarily because it proposed razing neighborhoods without offering former residents of these neighborhoods viable alternatives elsewhere in the city.⁵ BNOB recommended buying out residents in condemned neighborhoods, but offered no concrete funding sources or detailed plan for this process. Although many have criticized Mayor Nagin for failing to make tough decisions about the future of the city, this aide says the Mayor felt paralyzed by the lack of choices on the table and the lack of funding to develop and present residents with other options.⁶ As the months following Katrina went by, the Mayor grew increasingly frustrated by the patronizing assumptions of the federal government and other funders about his inability to manage New Orleans’ culture of corruption. Mayor Nagin initially ran for office on an anti-corruption platform and implemented many of his transparency promises in his first term. Yet, in his eyes, outsiders unfairly grouped him with other corrupt African-American big-city mayors. As this aide puts it, “he fits into a frame in their minds.”⁷

⁴ Bring New Orleans Back Urban Planning Committee. “Action Plan for New Orleans, Executive Summary.” January 30, 2006. Available at: <http://bringneworleansback.com/Portals/BringNewOrleansBack/Resources/EX%20SUMMARY%201-30-06.pdf>. Accessed March 12, 2007.

⁵ Interview 15.

⁶ Interestingly, the Mayor’s concern over lack of alternatives is precisely what leads some to criticize him. They question how he could ever release a plan that recommended not rebuilding some neighborhoods without having alternatives available for citizens who would be displaced (Interviews 6, 10).

⁷ Interview 15.

Aware that some parties blamed him for the New Orleans recovery debacle, Mayor Nagin feared that UNOP would become yet another effort that created a plan and then blamed him for inaction. The fact that the initiative came from the state did not help matters, since Nagin saw the state's interests as unaligned with the city. In one example, the LRA's Road Home program, which offers homeowners grants for rebuilding, decided to penalize homeowners who moved out of state, but not those who moved out of New Orleans to other parts of Louisiana.⁸

Since the initiative, funds, and some expertise for UNOP came from outside New Orleans, Mayor Nagin worried that the process would "paint him into a corner" by proposing ideas and then failing to provide funding to implement them.⁹ Ultimately, the Mayor responded to pressure from players at the state and local level and signed the memorandum of understanding.¹⁰ From the perspective of the Mayor's office, the UNOP process began as an unwelcome initiative orchestrated by outsiders.

The City Council's UNOP Perspective

The City Council was also initially unenthusiastic about UNOP. When the LRA began to make the rounds to collect signatures for the MOU, the Council was already committed to an intensive, grassroots neighborhood planning process led by the Miami-based firm, Lambert Advisory. The Council had initiated this process when it became clear that the BNOB's proposed neighborhood process would not move forward. Because the \$7.5 million in promised FEMA planning funds never materialized, the City Council funded the Lambert plan using left over funds from a pre-Katrina planning effort. The Council hoped that by conducting neighborhood planning, they could save New Orleans from being last in line for other dwindling federal funds.

While the Lambert Plan engaged citizens in planning their neighborhoods, it focused primarily on residents' visions, without metrics for prioritization or other reality checks.¹¹ More important to the LRA, it also failed to include all neighborhoods in the planning process, since only neighborhoods that had received more than two feet of flooding could participate.¹² The LRA wanted a comprehensive, citywide disaster recovery plan, but the Council balked since it had already expended \$3 million and countless energy developing the Lambert neighborhood plans.¹³

According to Councilmember Cynthia Hedge Morrell, her concerns were twofold. First, she worried that citizens were exhausted from planning and would not put up with another process. Second, she was apprehensive that the new planning teams would disregard the citizens' hard work on the Lambert Plan. She explains:

When UNOP started out, I have to tell you, I had worked really hard to get the council to do the Lambert plan. So when I met with Carey [Shea, representative of the Rockefeller Foundation,] and GNOF, I was apprehensive. I was thinking, "How am I going to go back to these people [in my district] and tell them, 'You have to plan again.'" And I had to fight with some of the architects and entities for them to understand that only by embracing all of the prior planning were you going to get buy-in.

⁸ Maggi, Laura. "LRA plan favors those who remain," *Times-Picayune*. Tuesday, February 21, 2006.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Interview 10.

¹¹ Interview 8.

¹² Interview 3, 16.

¹³ The politics of the City Council are also interesting. Four of the seven Councilmembers were elected in spring 2006 and Interview 10 noted that the old and new city Councilmembers were not communicating effectively. This schism is evident when viewing City Council meetings.

The LRA conceded that they would try to involve Lambert in the UNOP process – an attempt that failed – and promised to take the Lambert proceedings into account in developing the citywide plan. Even so, Councilmembers avoided signing the MOU until immediately before a press conference that would embarrass them if they failed to show action.

On top of these early objections, UNOP encountered an additional hurdle when the process' coordinators chose to appoint citizen representatives to the Community Support Organization (CSO) from the council districts. Since the citizen representatives came from council districts, the Councilmembers wanted a say in their selection.¹⁴ For the most part, the Community Support Foundation and the Councilmembers were able to agree upon the citizen representatives, but Councilmember Cynthia Willard-Lewis nominated and insisted upon the inclusion of former State Representative Sherman Copelin. The Community Support Foundation Board balked at Copelin's appointment, suggesting that he carried too much political "baggage."¹⁵ Ultimately, Councilmember Willard-Lewis agreed to nominate an alternate representative from her district, but the struggle perpetuated uneasy relations between the City Council and the UNOP process.

Other Parties' UNOP Perspectives

Even once the City Council and the Mayor had signed the MOU and launched UNOP, they and many others continued to feel skepticism over the purpose and direction of the plan. Below, I profile the concerns and confusion of the City Planning Commission and the general public.

The City Planning Commission's UNOP Perspective

When UNOP began, Yolanda Rodriguez, Executive Director of the City Planning Commission, thought she was facing the third recovery planning effort to circumvent her office, which possesses the official city-chartered responsibility for planning.¹⁶ When Hurricane Katrina hit, rather than turning to his in-house city planners, Mayor Nagin cut the City Planning Commission staff by 70 percent and their budget by 40 percent. He then took his planning initiative, BNOB, to external planners. BNOB never officially cycled back to the Commission for approval. When the Lambert planning process came along, the City Planning Commission was in the midst of developing a highly regarded *Neighborhood Recovery Planning Guide*.¹⁷ Rather than waiting for its release in the summer of 2006, the City Council contracted with Lambert and began its own process. Initially, Rodriguez welcomed the assistance, but eventually the Commission became frustrated by the fact that these processes were not following city protocol.

By the time UNOP came along, the CPC was finding it "uncomfortable" and "awkward" to have a third party conducting the city's recovery planning. Moreover, even Ms. Rodriguez herself felt "planning fatigue," after the series of unsuccessful previous efforts. As UNOP began, planners came to her for input in scoping out the process, but as the plan moved on, she felt increasingly removed.¹⁸

¹⁴ Interview 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Interview 9.

¹⁷ Interview 19.

¹⁸ UNOP planners feel that they worked closely with the CPC, especially at the beginning of the process, but both Ms. Rodriguez and Laurie Johnson agree that this interaction tapered off as the planning process became more intensive. Johnson says that as UNOP proceeded, Steve Binger of Concordia's UNOP coordinating team developed a clearer client relationship with the city. Rodriguez, on the other hand, did not feel that she had the opportunity to play the role of the client, offering feedback and making changes, until external planners completed and submitted the plan.

She worried that, yet again, a city plan would be developed without considering the City Planning Commission as its main client.

The General Public's UNOP Perspective

Wayne Lee, Chair of the Community Support Foundation, says that UNOP “began at a time when people were planned out.” Vera Triplett, Chair of the Community Support Organization, concurs: “You have to remember, we’re now on our third [planning process]. It’s hard to get people to come out after two big disappointments.” Tarence Davis, a member of the CSO, explains:

There were people expressing their weariness, their frustration. Before they even started to participate they wanted to make it known, “We’re tired. ... We don’t want to do anything again that doesn’t amount to anything.”

In addition to these concerns, residents of “wet” (i.e. previously flooded) neighborhoods, who participated in the Lambert process, felt that they had already planned. Others simply mistrusted the intentions of the UNOP developers and planners.

Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell had a particularly difficult time selling the UNOP process to her district, which had been heavily damaged by floods and intensively involved in the Lambert planning process. When she tried to introduce the UNOP process, she says:

I tell you, I thought they were going to lynch me. [They said,] “We’ve been planning since September. We want action!” ... The other plan was finished months ago and they’re like, “Take our plan. Forget the other people who didn’t plan.” And I’m like, “You can’t come up with a city plan that doesn’t include [dry neighborhoods like] Algiers and Uptown and the French Quarter.” They felt like, “Go plan with them and leave us alone.”

According to Virginia Blanque, a staff member to Councilmember Arnie Fielkow, residents of wet neighborhoods worried that every meeting would be a “re-invention” of their existing plan. They worried that UNOP planners would scrutinize what had already been accomplished and “pick it apart.” Moreover, they felt suspicious, since the LRA had conceded to involve Lambert in the planning process, but he did not participate, and in fact, publicly denounced the UNOP effort in a full-page advertisement in the *Times-Picayune*.¹⁹ Finally, they wondered if they would lose their place in line for funds, while they waited for the “dry” neighborhoods, which had not sustained substantial damage, to develop their own plans. Joe Williams, of the Community Support Foundation Board sums up the general sentiment, explaining, “When you put blood, sweat and tears into a process, you’re going to be somewhat protective of that process.”

In addition to concerns that the Lambert plans would be duplicated or disrespected, many residents were also suspicious of UNOP as a state-level initiative that wanted to include neighborhoods that had not been damaged, many of which were wealthy and white. The atmosphere of racial mistrust, exacerbated by the Bring New Orleans Back debacle, contributed to the public’s doubts about UNOP. LRA leaders intended to make UNOP an inclusive, democratic process, yet some critics questioned their intentions due to lingering suspicions from earlier planning processes.

¹⁹ Advertisement. *Times Picayune*. August 3, 2006.

Ms. Blanque encountered similar suspicions in her mid-city neighborhood. She explains:

People became a little more suspicious of [UNOP] because it included areas that they felt weren't as affected. It enveloped the dry and then came the conspiracy theorists with, "They're only doing this to benefit themselves; they didn't even have losses." ... Conspiracy theorists think that people are trying to just help the wealthy and white. The naysayers quite often feel that there are ulterior motives that are going to benefit those beautification do-gooders and not necessarily us. [They think,] "They're going to try to envelop us in their ideas and that's that."

Vera Triplett sums up the misgivings of the Mayor, the City Council, the City Planning Commission, and the general public when she says, "[UNOP] started off on very shaky ground."

Changing Perspectives on UNOP Over Time

Before turning to the role of public participation in UNOP, it is worth reviewing the other factors that increased confidence in UNOP as the process moved forward. Some factors involve mere timing. The Lambert process wrapped up in October, allowing residents in the "wet" neighborhoods to turn their attention to UNOP, which was already gaining some momentum.²⁰ Additional factors include the LRA's willingness to step back from the process, the planners' trustworthiness, and a growing feeling that the city was putting structures in place that could move recovery forward. Even with these advances, however, some parties remained skeptical or suspicious.

The timing of the UNOP plan, beginning a year following the hurricane, may seem late to some observers. For many in New Orleans, however, it was only many months after the traumatic event that they could begin to focus beyond grief and day-to-day survival. Kim Boyle, an LRA member involved with both BNOB and UNOP, explains that when BNOB took place in the fall of 2005, emotions were still "very raw." New Orleans residents, she says, were "still dealing with the immediacy of loss of life, loss of homes, loss of churches." Thus, while New Orleans residents are impatient to see action on re-building their city, the timing of UNOP allowed residents to focus more on the future of the city.

Once the LRA put UNOP in motion, board members did their best to fade into the woodwork. Donna Fraiche echoes the stance of other LRA members when she insists that the LRA does not oversee UNOP. Rather than "getting in the middle," Fraiche and others, "divorced themselves" from the process until the plan came to the LRA for approval. Andy Kopplin agrees that the LRA's low profile was crucial to the legitimacy of the plan. He explains:

The most important thing is that collectively we all got the political process right. I mean that the LRA secured the funding and then got out of the way, which I think was a very strategic and wise choice because so many local vs. state arrows were being flung that if the perception came out that the LRA is controlling UNOP, it was going to be an obstacle.

Although other players do not necessarily recognize this factor, the LRA's willingness to avoid taking credit for UNOP probably contributed to allowing New Orleans to own the plan.

Many players also mentioned that the UNOP planners and developers at the district, citywide, and overall coordination levels built confidence in the plan by being trustworthy and evidently committed to New Orleans. A top aide to the Mayor says that Nagin grew less apprehensive as it became clear that planners shared his concerns about welcoming residents home and providing alternatives to vulnerable, damaged housing. The aide explains, "he came to accept that these planners were not

²⁰ Interview 19.

going to paint him into a political corner by dropping a plan that he couldn't fund at his doorstep."²¹ Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell felt similarly encouraged by the planners' role in her district. She explains, "[UNOP planners] were diligent; they were respectful of what had been done before, which was key to getting people to buy-in." Vera Triplett, a resident of Gentilly, describes her own transformation from a stance of skepticism to one of greater hope, when she interacted with her district's planners:

I just immediately felt that these were people who were genuinely here, not to make money, not to make a name for themselves, but to really attempt to help the people in the district that they were representing get back their lives. Their availability, their immediacy, their way of communicating with people – just immediately that won me over.

In addition to the growing trust for UNOP's planners, the city began to take actions that offered hope that New Orleans would have structures in place to implement UNOP. In December, the city hired Dr. Ed Blakely, a renowned disaster recovery planner, to manage the city's re-building. As a distinguished African-American, Dr. Blakely brings a combination of personal and professional attributes to the table that has inspired great confidence among city leaders and the public.²² While Dr. Blakely was not hired specifically to implement UNOP, which has not yet received official approval, his presence in the city enhanced the sense that New Orleans was moving toward implementing a plan.

Even with all of this positive momentum, some players maintain hesitations about UNOP. A top aide for the Mayor cautions that, although Nagin has become less concerned about UNOP, his endorsements at the Community Congresses stem more from political expediency than from personal enthusiasm.²³ The aide says that in private conversation before and since he continues to feel like an outsider to the process with some on-going doubts. Both on the City Council and on the CSO, Vera Triplett sees some members, "who had made up their minds about the process before it started," and continue to make the process difficult by participating in UNOP and "denouncing it at the same time." A media observer says that she and other local analysts continue to have misgivings about the "financing and implementation of the plan on a grand scale," particularly in terms of how it meshes with existing activity.²⁴ CSO member Tarence Davis continues to see some "skeptics" and "conspiracy theorists" in his district.

Despite these concerns, Mr. Davis and other informants agree that the average person in New Orleans is merely "cautious." He explains, "Even though they're participating, they're saying, 'I'm not going to make judgments, I'm going to wait until the end.'" At the City Planning Commission, Ms. Rodriguez echoes this sentiment when she says, "the proof will be in pudding." Even as some wait to pass judgment, Andy Kopplin of the LRA suggests that growing confidence outweighs these final hesitations. He explains, "It took months of political negotiation first and civic engagement second to get to the point now where people are actually showing up and believing in the process." In the next section, I turn to the specific role that civic engagement played in enhancing leaders' views of the credibility and substance of UNOP.

²¹ Interview 15.

²² Laurie Johnson articulated this view, but all informants with whom I spoke expressed their excitement to work with Dr. Blakely on the recovery.

²³ Interview 15.

²⁴ Interview 18.

ROLE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN UNOP

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was not a city with a strong history of citizen engagement efforts. Where activism emerged, it generally focused on defeating projects and was therefore short-lived. Rather than neighborhood associations, community life in New Orleans organized itself around Mardi Gras crews, social clubs, and churches.²⁵ In the aftermath of the storm, however, New Orleanians came together out of necessity and desire. In grassroots efforts and in various planning processes, new civic leadership emerged. Dr. Triplett, who now chairs UNOP's CSO, describes an experience emblematic of New Orleans' new spirit of involvement. Speaking of her life prior to Katrina, she says:

My focus had always been on what I was doing ... and I had only a peripheral knowledge of community and how important it was to those issues. And then after the storm, I began to think, you know what? I don't know my neighbors. ... I've lived around these people for, at that time, over eight, nine years and I hardly knew any of them. I didn't even know a lot of their first names. ... At this point, I don't know if I'll ever see them again and what a waste. And as a result of that realization, both my husband and I began to be really sort of involved in community matters and advocating not so much for anything in particular to happen, but advocating for real, factual, substantive information.

Dr. Triplett's experience of developing a neighborhood association in Gentilly is similar to events across the city. Ms. Rodriguez of the CPC says that some neighborhoods began planning immediately after the storm, even holding meetings in tents. The Lambert planning process formalized some of these neighborhood efforts.

From the very beginning of UNOP, its developers and planners believed that building on this surge of participation was essential to the success of the plan. This section considers their motivations for allowing extensive public input, presents the challenges to public participation in post-Katrina New Orleans, then lays out the various components of the participation program, describing each in turn. I devote particular attention to the Community Congresses and their role in the larger UNOP process.

Motivations for Emphasizing Public Participation

For many public officials and planners, citizen participation is considered an obstacle that consumes their time and resources, undermines their authority, and disrupts implementation of their plans. Often, they would rather avoid it at all costs. For this reason, it is worth considering what motivated UNOP's developers and planners to design a process that insisted on intensive public input. Notably, the developers of UNOP consisted of elite citizens on a state board, foundation employees, and the planning staff they chose. Thus, by virtue of their position and attributes, UNOP's developers differed from public officials and city staff. While some leaders were influenced by information on planning "best practices," the main motivator for emphasizing participation was the history of the previous two planning processes. As subsequent sections will demonstrate, UNOP's developers and planners did not always get public involvement right, but they considered it a crucial element from the beginning and worked hard at it over time.

The LRA members who instigated the UNOP process insisted on the primacy of public participation. Some, like Dr. Francis, were influenced by early meetings of expert planners in New Orleans, immediately following the storm. In November 2005, the American Planning Association and the American Institute of Architects came together for a conference that included selected leaders and

²⁵ Interviews 1, 13.

citizens in developing a vision for re-building New Orleans. The experts emphasized citizen participation in planning.²⁶ Dr. Francis explains:

The bottom line that came out of it was: you have to plan. You have to engage people who are, number one, affected by it, people who were going through it in many ways, and of course experts. And I know that this was valuable because as I look back now at the months that have pursued, remnants of that initial meeting took hold.

In addition to this early expert advice, UNOP leaders were strongly influenced by the experience of previous planning processes. Andy Kopplin of the LRA clearly states, “I’m not sure that UNOP would have come out as well if we hadn’t learned from [the lack of participation] in BNOB.” The BNOB process did include some public forums, but outreach was limited and, in the fall of 2005 when BNOB planning took place, relatively few residents had returned to the city. Through the BNOB process, the LRA and other leaders learned that, “It doesn’t matter what the plan is if no one embraces it. There has to be a process to embrace it.” Kopplin continues, “What happened the first time was there was no connection between planners, politicians, and people.” In developing UNOP, the LRA and the planning teams worked hard to ensure that, “the ability for there to be a disconnect between the people and the planners was erased.”

When the LRA’s designees at GNOF went about choosing the Community Support Foundation board, they chose present and former board members – three white and three African-American – who shared these views. Each of the CSF members with whom I spoke emphasized the importance that the process was “ground up.”²⁷ Joe Williams explained that when GNOF asked him to join the CSF, his primary concern was that the whole process be transparent, with mechanisms for citizens to contribute their thoughts.

The fact that UNOP’s developers also had to contend with the on-going Lambert Plan offered another reason to emphasize citizen participation. With Lambert underway, many citizens were already engaged in and knowledgeable about planning. Failure to include them in UNOP would have had serious consequences for the plan’s credibility. Councilmember Hedge-Morrell believes that the history of BNOB and then the Lambert plan were crucial to developing a “savvy citizenry,” ready to make their voices heard through UNOP. Even with the best of intentions, however, UNOP’s planners concede that they learned to make citizen participation work as they went along. Subsequent sections present the various elements of the UNOP public participation program, the challenges to participation in post-Katrina New Orleans, and the evolution of UNOP’s citizen engagement events.

²⁶ The APA/AIA meeting was, in fact, AmericaSpeaks first involvement with the New Orleans recovery efforts. The organization recruited diverse participants and facilitated the meeting.

²⁷ Interview 2, 8, and 20.

Citizen Participation Elements of UNOP

Although my focus is the role of citywide public participation events in UNOP, I first briefly describe the role of the Community Support Organization (CSO) and the district-level participation efforts.

The Community Support Organization

The Community Support Organization consisted of citizen representatives from each of the five New Orleans City Council districts, along with agency liaisons from the Mayor's Office, City Council, City Planning Commission, and the Rockefeller Foundation. During the UNOP process, the group met biweekly to hear updates from planners and input from citizens who came to comment. Just as GNOF chose CSF members who supported the citizen engagement agenda, the CSF chose dedicated and outspoken citizen representatives for the CSO, who were willing to challenge UNOP planners. Rather than selecting the "usual suspects," the CSF appointed emerging leaders. CSF Chair Wayne Lee explains, "Before this process began, putting aside the City Council member that's on [the CSO], I knew personally only two of the [nine] people who ultimately were selected."

CSO Chair Dr. Triplett explains that her committee members were all, "vocal and not afraid. I mean we're mostly not politicians, so we're not looking for votes. [We were] all people who really did challenge [the planners]." CSO member Mr. Davis echoes Dr. Triplett, saying "Our job was to call the process to the table when it looked like it was not representing citizens." Mr. Davis says the CSO picked through the planners' presentations, "with fine tooth comb," and on many occasions made them come back with more complete information. The CSO's efforts reverberated throughout the process in that the citizen audience at CSO meetings sometimes reached as high as 100 people. Councilmember Hedge-Morrell, who sits on the CSO, also found that a number of her constituents actively watched the CSO meetings on public access television.

District-level UNOP Participation

Community leaders in New Orleans routinely commented on the value of the UNOP district-level planning processes. UNOP used the thirteen planning districts defined by the City Planning Commission and engaged eleven planning firms that worked with districts and the neighborhoods within them. The process included four rounds of district meetings, which leaders perceived as largely well attended and productive. Carey Shea of Rockefeller commented on the district plans as a particularly valuable aspect of UNOP, in that "the plans were done in the spirit of cooperation between citizens and professional planners," and resulted in practical tools. The districts themselves also brought people together across lines of race and class, since disparate neighborhoods may fall in the same planning district.²⁸ My interviews did not specifically examine the district-level process, but further research on the role of public participation in UNOP should undoubtedly explore the district meetings in more depth.

²⁸ Interviews 1, 8, and 14.

Citywide Citizen Participation in UNOP

Although UNOP's planners and developers espoused their commitment to civic engagement, community leaders characterized the early citywide UNOP events as "disasters."²⁹ Even with an increasingly active citizenry, the challenges to achieving citywide citizen engagement in New Orleans were substantial. First, the city lacks "civic roots," despite the recent flowering of activity. Second, as described in preceding sections, some New Orleans residents have grown jaded after a series of failed planning processes. Third, the legacy of racial mistrust that has festered following Katrina makes participation without the right mix of participants and leaders a potential minefield. And, finally, securing the right mix – demographically representative participants in a city scattered by hurricanes and floods – is a logistical nightmare. As of late 2006, somewhere between sixty percent to half of pre-Katrina New Orleans residents had not returned to the city. Those who remain in exile are disproportionately from groups that would be hardest to engage under any circumstances: low-income, African-American renters. To overcome potential allegations of racism and classism, UNOP had to reach these geographically disparate groups and it had to do it quickly. From beginning to end, the entire UNOP process lasted only five months, an incredibly compressed timeframe for developing a citywide recovery plan.

Early on, UNOP's citywide participation failed to reach the goal of engaging New Orleans' diverse residents and hurricane diaspora. As planners learned from these experiences, they began to work with AmericaSpeaks, an organization specializing in large-scale citizen participation. Starting with Community Congress II, citywide participatory events became central to UNOP's credibility. In this section, I first describe the series of events that led up to Community Congress II, then explain the importance of this event for leaders' views of UNOP's credibility and substance.

Early Citywide UNOP Meetings

Even before the first Community Congress, the UNOP coordinating staff from Concordia held an event to help neighborhoods choose their planning teams. At the all-day event, the planners failed to anticipate space needs and were forced to accommodate 400 people in a space meant for 300, in squelching heat, with too few chairs and materials.³⁰ According to Carey Shea, the event practically collapsed, since the facilitators were not audible and could not get the crowd to break into small groups. At another early public event, Councilmember Arnie Fielkow held a public hearing to introduce UNOP. The event was well-attended, but the presenters from UNOP were not prepared, lacking visual aids, and failing to make a compelling pitch to the public.³¹ By Community Congress I, UNOP was still struggling to pull together an effective public engagement effort.

Community Congress I

The citywide planning team of Villavaso-Henry was responsible for executing three citywide meetings, which they termed, "Community Congresses." Other teams who submitted proposals for the citywide contract wrote AmericaSpeaks into their plans, as the coordinator of the citywide meetings. When Villavaso-Henry won the contract, the Community Support Foundation invited AmericaSpeaks to assist the planning team, with the understanding that AmericaSpeaks would raise its own funds to

²⁹ Interview 1.

³⁰ Interviews 1, 12.

³¹ Interview 1.

participate. Funds did not materialize in time for AmericaSpeaks to handle participant outreach for Community Congress I, but they did offer their technology, facilitation expertise, and additional counsel to Villavaso-Henry for the first event.³²

Community Congress I (CCI), held on October 28, 2006, failed to live up to the expectations of community leaders and the public. Three hundred residents attended CCI and according to demographic polling at the event, participants were disproportionately wealthy, white, and from “dry” neighborhoods. Table 1 compares the CCI participants to the demographics of pre-Katrina New Orleans. CCI participants were over three-quarters white, while the white proportion of the population pre-Katrina was only 28 percent. Likewise, more than half of CCI participants earned over \$60,000 annually, while only 26 percent of pre-Katrina residents earned as much. Finally, while close to 20 percent of New Orleanians lived in the heavily damaged area of New Orleans East (planning districts 9 and 10) before the hurricane, only 2.5 percent of CCI participants lived in these areas.

Table 1. CCI Attendance Compared to New Orleans’ Pre-Katrina Demographics

	CCI Attendance	Actual Pre-Katrina
District of Residence		
District 1 or 2	20.50%	11.20%
District 3 or 4	31.50%	30.20%
District 5 or 6	17.00%	14.40%
District 7 or 8	8.50%	12.50%
District 9 or 10	2.50%	19.50%
District 11 or 12	5.00%	11.90%
District 13	1.50%	0.20%
Elsewhere	13.00%	N/A
Race / Ethnicity		
African American	16.59%	67.30%
Asian American	0.00%	2.30%
Caucasian	75.36%	28.10%
Hispanic/Latino	0.47%	3.10%
Native American	0.00%	0.20%
More than one race	4.74%	1.30%
Other	2.84%	1.00%
Annual Income	CCI Attendance	Actual Pre-Katrina
<\$20K	10.80%	37.00%
\$20K-\$39K	14.08%	24.00%
\$40K-\$59K	18.78%	14.00%
\$60K-\$74,999K	10.33%	7.00%
\$75,000 +	40.85%	19.00%
Don’t know/Prefer not to say	5.16%	N/A

Source: AmericaSpeaks keypad polling data

³² Conversation with Joe Goldman of AmericaSpeaks.

Members of the CSF, CSO, and the general public found the event disappointing.³³ Dr. Triplett explains:

CCI was just a flop. It had too few people; it was not representative of the pre-Katrina demographics of the city. Most of the people there were Uptowners, affluent. So their concerns would not be my concern. And would not be the concerns of the majority of the city that did flood.

Adding insult to injury, CCI included a question that raised the specter of the BNOB “footprint” issue, asking whether New Orleans would have to “maintain its physical size,” to feel like home. Both Councilmember Hedge-Morrell and Dr. Triplett felt that the biased sample of citizens who participated at CCI produced a “slanted” vision for the city. Councilmember Hedge-Morrell explains:

It concerned me that there were people wanting to have green space. That response was so similar to the Bring New Orleans Back footprint issues and I knew they were not taking into consideration the poor, and if you look at economic breakdown of first Congress, there weren't any poor people in there. ... If you didn't go through [the flood], then you don't understand. You can be in the same city, but if you didn't have 10 feet of water in your house you can't understand the loss, even though you went through the storm. It's just different.

Dr. Triplett, from the flood-damaged Gentilly neighborhood, conveyed a similar view about opinions from the “dry” neighborhoods:

It was the matter of – you don't need what we need. Our needs so far surpass yours. ... You can drive around parts of Uptown and pretend nothing ever happened. ... That's different from my reality. I drive past abandoned houses and abandoned lots every day. So I could understand [the dry neighborhood residents] saying, “Why can't we have a voice; why can't we have a say?” You can, but not in all of these matters, because not all of these matters relate to you.

The failure of CCI had important consequences for UNOP in that it confirmed some skeptics' worst fears about the effort. Although UNOP espoused inclusivity, CCI made the process look as though it favored the wealthy, white residents views. Observers also felt that it demonstrated a mismanagement of valuable planning resources. Dr. Triplett explains that after CCI, she felt like asking the UNOP planners:

What are you guys doing? ... Because, let's face it, they got a massive amount of money – millions and millions. And let's face it – they way I looked at it – that money could have been used for other things in this city.

Carey Shea of Rockefeller agreed with Dr. Triplett. After CCI, she saw New Orleans residents looking at this multimillion dollar planning process and saying, “This is the best you can do?” Shea felt strongly that UNOP's public participation effort was headed down the wrong road. Triplett, Shea and others agree that CCI instilled distrust and confusion among those who did not attend, and even among those who did. Those who were not there felt excluded, while those who attended wondered why their voices were not enough.³⁴

According to Laurie Johnson of the Villavaso-Henry team, CCI, “came a lot faster than hoped due to the delay in kicking off the process,” while planners waited for the MOU to be signed. At CCI, planners intended to establish a sense of the community vision, needs, and goals, but they also wanted to communicate the research the team had conducted thus far, as part of the citywide recovery assessment. Johnson says, “As a disaster researcher, I felt like we needed to have some level of top-down [information] to capture citywide needs. For a city this big and a disaster this complex, you

³³ Interviews 1, 4, 5, 8, and 14.

³⁴ Interviews 1, 4, and 5.

can't do just bottom up." Johnson and her colleagues thought that the event went well as a "press conference," but failed to engage citizens in real voting and participation.

Johnson readily admits that she and her colleagues did not possess expertise on recruiting citizen participation. Their lack of experience in this arena was complicated by an unclear division of duties between the Villavaso-Henry team and the UNOP coordinating staff from Concordia. Concordia handled public communications, but did not report to the Villavaso-Henry team who was in charge of the citywide events. In part for this reason, citizen outreach initially received inadequate attention. When UNOP planners budgeted for outreach, they put funds into print advertising and signs. Johnson explains that at first, "no one knew we would need more than that." UNOP's planners and coordinators agreed that the key to an inclusive process was to represent the "pre-Katrina demographics" of New Orleans at citywide participatory events. After CCI, it was clear that the task was much larger than they had anticipated. While UNOP started off on shaky ground, CCI was the low point for the plan in terms of local credibility.

A Citizen Engagement Course Correction

By the time CCI was complete, AmericaSpeaks was already on board to plan Community Congress II (CCII), to be held on December 2, 2006. Dr. Triplett explains that after CCI the planners realized, that a fully inclusive participatory process "was much too vast to take on by themselves." CCI convinced planners and coordinators that engaging citizens required specific expertise, and they were ready to engage with AmericaSpeaks to make CCII a success.³⁵ Although the failure of CCI was sobering, members of the CSF and the CSO treated it as a "learning process." Dr. Triplett says that the planners rose to the challenge of improving citizen engagement. She describes the CSO's process of conveying concerns to the planners.

We were just like, "you're not doing enough." If this is a process that is really, truly supposed to engage the public and get their opinions and find out what they need then you need to do it and you need to do it not in a traditional marketing way because a lot of these people don't have access to that. People don't have televisions and radios. They're living in tents; they're living in trailers; they're living in shelters. So you have to find another way.

Despite the faltering, Triplett says that planners showed a "willingness to accommodate our concerns." Joe Williams of the CSF agrees: "midcourse corrections ... got us to the right place."

Community Congress II

On December 2, 2006, AmericaSpeaks gathered 2,500 past and present residents of New Orleans across multiple cities, connected by telecast and Internet. In New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta, telecasts connected participants for AmericaSpeaks signature "Twenty-First Century Town Meeting." In 16 other cities, other members of New Orleans' hurricane diaspora participated via the Internet. Through technological innovations such as networked laptops and individualized keypad polling, AmericaSpeaks events enable small-group discussions at diverse tables to feed into large-group sharing and decision-making. When AmericaSpeaks polled participants to understand which voices were represented at the meeting, they found that they had succeeded in gathering a group that approximated the pre-Katrina demographics of New Orleans. For instance, 64

³⁵ Interview 19.

percent of CCII participants were African-American, compared to 67 percent in the pre-Katrina New Orleans population. Table 2 presents the results of demographic polling at the event.

Table 2. CCII Attendance Compared to New Orleans’ Pre-Katrina Demographics

	CCII Attendance	Actual Pre-Katrina
District of Residence		
District 1 or 2	9.70%	11.20%
District 3 or 4	23.30%	30.20%
District 5 or 6	23.70%	14.40%
District 7 or 8	13.30%	12.50%
District 9 or 10	24.10%	19.50%
District 11 or 12	5.40%	11.90%
District 13	0.50%	0.20%
Race / Ethnicity		
African American	64.00%	67.30%
Asian American	4.00%	2.30%
Caucasian	27.00%	28.10%
Hispanic/Latino	2.00%	3.10%
Native American	0.00%	0.20%
More than one race	2.00%	1.30%
Other	1.00%	1.00%
Annual Income		
<\$20K	25.00%	37.00%
\$20K-\$39K	22.00%	24.00%
\$40K-\$59K	17.00%	14.00%
\$60K-\$74,999K	8.00%	7.00%
\$75,000 +	20.00%	19.00%
Don’t know/Prefer not to say	7.00%	N/A

Source: AmericaSpeaks keypad polling data

The 20 community leaders with whom I spoke varied in terms of their knowledge of Community Congress II, but all except for one considered the event a tremendous success for UNOP. Those who had attended and knew the process well were convinced that CCII was crucial to enabling “buy-in” for UNOP. CCII did not turn every player into an unqualified supporter of the process, but it did enhance the credibility of the plan among leaders, and, as they see it, in the public eye. Kim Boyle, a leader in both the BNOB and UNOP processes, says that, had it not been for CCII and AmericaSpeaks’ involvement in it, she does not think the UNOP plan would have had same level of credibility.

CCII and Enhanced Credibility

Although they were impressed by AmericaSpeaks’ technology, community leaders felt that what really helped to enhance UNOP’s credibility was the extensive outreach to ordinary people, which allowed the representative voices of New Orleans to be heard. In addition, many leaders were deeply moved by how the diversity in the room enabled meaningful discussions across difference. Below, I offer community leaders’ perspectives on how these two related factors – including a representative range of

New Orleans voices and allowing for discussions among diverse individuals – contributed to enhancing UNOP’s credibility.

Representative Voices:

CSF Chair Wayne Lee describes the role of Community Congress II in the following way:

In my opinion, it was first and foremost to get input, secondly was to provide information to the community. ... And thirdly, I think it was important, frankly, to give credibility to what we were doing. Having the community actively involved supports the idea that this is a plan that should be embraced down the line because people have helped to form it.

Joe Williams of the CSF board also felt that CCII increased credibility, by assuring people that their voices were heard.

It’s a very rare opportunity to see your voice contributing to a process, being reflected in the answers, and being documented. This is the first time I’d seen that. And this is citizens across the country in many different locations. ... They even gave a written summary as you walked out the door. I think it was extremely positive. I think it gave even more credence to the process.

On the whole, Community leaders agreed that involving the diaspora and achieving participation similar to pre-Katrina demographics was the key to increasing credibility. Carey Shea explains:

When the numbers came up and it was clear that those people participating mirrored the demographics pretty much of pre-Katrina New Orleans, that was just a threshold. You could have had 2000 people in the room, 5000 people in the room, but if the demographics weren’t right, that would have just tainted the rest of the day. ... [AmericaSpeaks] hit the mark on that and once that happened everything could flow and we could go on.

Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell felt particularly strongly that CCII had enhanced UNOP’s overall legitimacy through involving the diaspora.

I think [it 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. That’s probably the one thing I would give UNOP real, real credit for. ... [CCII] reminded me of true democracy like the town hall meeting. Like you’re in Massachusetts or Connecticut and you all come to the town hall meeting and you all speak your mind and everybody knows everybody and all that. That to me is democracy as it was originally visioned.

Dr. Francis also emphasized the essential step of involving the diaspora, explaining, “You could not have accomplished what one would say to be a totally responsible plan if that had not been done.” CSO member HMK Amen concurred that including the diaspora made the UNOP process more just and legitimate, saying “the people who need their voices heard are those who lived here and are now gone.” By including ordinary voices and the diaspora, the CPC’s Yolanda Rodriguez agreed that CCII, “made a huge difference in dispelling suspicions,” about UNOP.

Discussions Across Diversity:

For those who had attended CCII and participated at a table, the ability to engage with others across lines of difference that are not normally bridged in New Orleans was considered an extraordinary gift. Although the community leaders do not directly connect these meaningful

discussions to the credibility of the plan, their experience has clearly influenced their thinking about the value of the process.

Joe Williams described how impressed he was to see “people across all boundaries sitting at tables. Not with your friends but with people you don’t know. Sitting and planning the future of your city. I think it’s excellent.” This aspect of CCII also moved CSO member Tarence Davis. He relates:

I really think that UNOP is probably an unprecedented democratic process that has gone on in New Orleans. I think this may be the first time that people of all races, creeds, from various neighborhoods actually had an opportunity to sit down with each other and engage in discussion. I think a lot of times we create perceptions of each other based on what we see in the media, what we read in the newspaper and never have had the opportunity to sit down and talk with people who could only be a couple blocks away from us. And I think that’s the greatest part of the UNOP process so far is that it has broken down barriers that have existed for a long time in New Orleans between people who just consider themselves to be different and now have been allowed to come together to explore those differences and those similarities.

CSO Chair Vera Triplett also expressed her amazement at the productive interaction of different groups during CCII.

More than anything, I think the thing I was most impressed with about Community Congress II, in addition to just the sheer numbers they were able to reach, when I went and I walked around, I saw people sitting at tables together of different socioeconomic backgrounds, different parts of town, having healthy discussions. Not necessarily always agreeing, but actually having conversations. Not just rhetoric, not yelling and screaming, but really just having healthy conversations about what they saw as the issue here.

After the disappointment of CCI, planner Laurie Johnson found herself, “completely overwhelmed and overjoyed by the whole experience [of CCII]; being side by side with people from different walks of life that do not engage with each other normally and who are coming to understand each others’ points of view.”

Evidence of Enhanced Credibility

For these community leaders and others, CCII enhanced UNOP’s credibility, by engaging a representative set of voices and enabling conversations across difference. But is there any actual evidence that CCII altered support for UNOP in ways that might ease its passage and implementation? Several informants suggested that CCII had changed attitudes and behaviors in ways that deserve further exploration. Planner Laurie Johnson explained that after CCII, “Everything changed. Our legitimacy was nailed to the ground by CCII. People shifted from worrying about the Lambert process to thinking [UNOP] is going to be bigger.” Informants saw these changes in terms of increased participation at some subsequent meetings, more substantial and more positive media coverage, increased support from political leaders, and perhaps even indications that more members of the diaspora were coming home.

Participation:

CSO Chair Vera Triplett believes that more people began attending CSO meetings following the success of CCII.

Media:

Several UNOP insiders felt that CCII contributed to increasing the coverage of UNOP and improving the slant of news stories.³⁶ While this possibility warrants testing, a local media observer did not see the second community congress as a turning point for press coverage. She did, however, observe that local journalists responded enthusiastically to the “polling” aspect of the Community Congresses, as an alternative to going to public hearings and listening to extreme voices at the microphone. She says that journalists compared the process to “getting a survey from a respected pollster,” which enabled them to understand and report on a process that at times seemed amorphous.

Political Support:

Informants suggest that CCII may have converted some UNOP skeptics on the City Council and in the Mayor’s office. With most political leaders, it is difficult to understand whether a change in support indicates a genuine change of heart or a calculated decision. Whatever the reason, New Orleans political leaders are now publicly supportive of UNOP. Councilmember Arnie Fielkow, for instance, says that CCII “gained credibility” and that “the full Council is in support of the [UNOP] process and sees it as a manifestation of the will of the people.”

Planner Laurie Johnson thinks CCII was responsible for this shift through two distinct avenues. First, she believes that the AmericaSpeaks briefings with political leaders prior to the Congress were crucial to opening lines of communication. Second, she believes that political leaders could not argue with the scale, representativeness, and professional execution of CCII. These factors generated excitement around UNOP and made politicians want to be a part of the process. After CCII she saw Councilmember Hedge-Morrell’s support for UNOP improve in terms of her articulation of UNOP’s purpose and her responses to constituents at CSO meetings. Whereas before, Councilmembers could get away with denigrating UNOP with off-handed comments that suggested their lack of interest in the plan, Johnson feels that after CCII political leaders realized they could not “get away with,” that attitude any more.

Finally, some informants believe that CCII led to a shift in the Mayor’s attitudes toward UNOP. At least three informants perceived his comments at CCII as a public endorsement of the process. Dr. Triplett explains:

I can say that emphatically, [CCII] really did increase the credibility [of UNOP]. It increased the momentum. I mean to have the Mayor at CCII – the Mayor who had previously been like this to the plan [*gestures standoffishly*], saying, ‘Well, you know, I’m encouraged by this. To see so many people here and to see all the outreach efforts.’ ... To some that would be not so much, but [it is significant to me] because I know how removed he has tried to be.

LRA and CSF member Kim Boyle agreed that citizen participation in the Community Congresses “showed elected officials just how much the community was in favor of this process.” She says, “The elected officials were more enthusiastic as a result of the citizen involvement.” Soon after CCII, the Mayor’s newly appointed Executive Counsel began attending CSO meetings after a prolonged absence of any Mayoral liaison. A top Mayoral aide does not attribute the Counsel’s presence to the Mayor’s experience at CCII, but allows that, “At CCII, the Mayor did realize the power of the people.” The aide suggests that while the

³⁶ Interviews 5, 19; conversation with Joe Goldman of AmericaSpeaks.

event was not a personal turning point for the Mayor, he did find it politically necessary to “put on a happy face.”

Diaspora Returns:

Both Councilmember Hedge-Morrell and Dr. Triplett suggested that the welcoming and hopeful atmosphere that CCII established might actually be encouraging more exiles from the hurricane to return home to New Orleans. This suggestion cannot be confirmed without further exploration, but these two informants felt they had seen indications of increasing returns.

CCII and UNOP Substance

While almost all of my informants commented on the ways in which CCII enhanced support for UNOP, none of my informants spoke of CCII primarily as a way to improve the substance of UNOP. This section does not aim to provide an exhaustive survey of how planners incorporated citizen views. Rather, I describe public leaders’ perceptions of the substance of what citizens had to say. In closing, I offer a few examples of how planners say that they took citizen feedback into account.

At CCI, community leaders worried that the biased sample of participants would unduly influence UNOP in a particular direction. Yet once the demographic mix was correct at CCII, community leaders appeared far more interested in the event as a means to earn “buy-in,” than as a way to improve the actual plan. It is worth noting that the information gathered at CCII was directed toward the planning team, who would assemble the findings before presenting them to leaders for approval. Thus, as a few informants indicated, some leaders suspended judgment on the substance of the plan until its release. Nonetheless, if leaders considered public engagement so important to the process, it would stand to reason that they would keep close track of citizens’ views so that they could be sure they were represented in the ultimate plan. Although my questioning on the topic of citizen contributions to the plan’s substance was no less consistent than my questioning about the plan’s credibility, leaders did not speak with one voice on this issue.

At least five of my informants had not looked at the preliminary report on citizens’ recommendations released after CCII. LRA board members and staff were particularly likely to avoid examining the recommendations, as part of the LRA’s general effort to step back from the city’s planning process. Two informants clearly articulated how the inclusion of representative voices affected the substance of the plan. Dr. Triplett emphasized that only members of the diaspora can truly convey the critical nature of New Orleans housing issue, since they are the ones who remain displaced. Joe Williams reflected on how the input of citizens impacted the process in a very direct way:

In a number of questions, the way things were included was A, B, C, or D, or other. I think [having the “other” option] was key because in a number of these situations, the ultimate answers were not the original multiple choice, they were typed into the computer at the tables in five different locations and they were voted on and they were included subsequently in the information. There were at least about three questions where the information was substantially changed based on input from the public. So, to me, that was absolutely key and you can’t get that type of result if you’re dealing at the elite level with ten or fifteen people in a room talking about this. Especially ten or fifteen people who are back, and dry, can afford to be there, maybe have bought another house in Baton Rouge and can drive in. You’re not going to get that real important kind of grassroots feedback in that type of a situation.

Others questioned whether including representative voices really changed the recommendations of the plan. CSF chair Wayne Lee generally supported the need for input, but wondered if it would have an effect on the plan's substance.

You wouldn't have the credibility without the input and it wouldn't be a good plan without the community's input along with planners who get people to focus on challenges. We needed both and I think we got both. ... At end of day we may find that when you bring everyone together some of same priorities are still high priorities as were voiced in other processes, but now you have a citywide voice that embraces it, supports it, and substantiates it.

CSO member Tarence Davis came away from the process feeling that citizens in general wanted the same things – the basic necessities to have a good quality of life. Several informants suggested that the timing of CCII was such that New Orleans residents had already coalesced around a pragmatic sense of how to move forward. Following BNOB and CCI, the most controversial proposal – shrinking New Orleans' footprint – was largely off the table. By December 2006, New Orleans residents also had a sense of the scope of the damage and what it meant to live in sparsely populated neighborhoods with limited services. Ideas proposed by UNOP's planners, such as “clustering” within existing neighborhoods, were palatable compromises in view of this reality.³⁷ In this version of events, leaders did not pay a great deal of attention to the substance of citizens' comments at CCII because the worst options were no longer possibilities.

Finally, four informants argued that the substance was almost irrelevant. One local businessman and state-committee appointee rationalized that the city would only have enough money to “re-build key infrastructure and help people get back in homes. What we need is just a plan for everyone to buy in to.”³⁸ The Mayor's aide agreed that CCII was important for “consensus-building,” “education,” and “bringing people together,” but not for the substance of the plan, characterizing the focus of CCII as “motherhood and apple pie.” When push comes to shove, the aide felt, politicians think they know what the people want – “it's built into the qualifications” – so they do not do public participation to listen; they do it to gain support.³⁹ Dr. Blakely described citizen participation as therapeutic; a way to “keep things from falling apart.” The comments of these community leaders indicate that some UNOP observers valued the Community Congresses as a means to build support for the plan, but not as a mechanism for distilling local knowledge and understanding the public will.⁴⁰

One additional plausible reason why leaders paid less attention to the substance of citizens' comments at CCII is that they knew that many controversial decisions would be left to the city to address later in the process. CSF board member Joe Williams pointed out that the plan itself would sidestep some of the political mines that BNOB hit by offering the city a framework for making decisions about how to invest recovery dollars without specifying specific locations. Williams explained:

I think what is probably going to happen is that the plan itself will represent input from people with an overall citywide approach to what makes the most sense in terms of recovery. Now, I don't know how much detail they're going to go into in terms of the footprint issues. I think they're going to recommend things like clustering that make a lot of sense given the situation.

Williams went on to say that UNOP would not include a definitive map like the controversial “green-dot” map from BNOB, which pointed to large areas that would be converted from residences to green space. He agreed, however, that at some point the city would have to make more difficult decisions

³⁷ Interviews 17, 18, 19, 20.

³⁸ Interview 10. (Interestingly, however, this individual had paid close attention to the CCII feedback and criticized a few aspects of the responses, as I detail in the section on criticisms below.)

³⁹ Interview 15.

⁴⁰ Interview 13.

about the geography of rebuilding, which he expected would be negotiated with Dr. Blakely's office and his own New Orleans Recovery Authority. One of the main instigator's of UNOP agreed with Williams, "I don't want this plan to put up a map. It's DOA [dead on arrival] if you do that. ... When a planner starts drawing maps, they step over the line of helping to becoming government."⁴¹ City planning staff concurred. Yolanda Rodriguez of the CPC said simply, "UNOP will not produce a map." A top Mayoral aide concurred that UNOP's planners should, "Let us own the 'map problem'."

Some leaders' comments about the substance of the plan suggest that citizen input was necessary for buy-in, but on some issues will not influence officials' ultimate decisions. Kim Boyle, who served on the LRA, the CSF, and the previous BNOB commission, explained the important balance between citizen input and official discretion in this way.

UNOP is silent about a lot of issues because I don't know if that process, even with professional planners, could address every question. And it wasn't intended to. Elected officials will have to make hard decisions. UNOP was great and it was important to receive citizens' thoughts and feelings about how the city should look. But bottom line, officials are elected to make the hard decisions.

Even so, Ms. Boyle is quick to note that participation through UNOP "wasn't just to make citizens feel good." The plan, she explained, used citizen input and other information to develop a framework from which elected and appointed officials can make decisions moving forward. She concludes:

It wasn't just something for citizens to spend another several months of their stressful lives on. That was never the intent. I think it would be completely wrong to come away with the impression that we just spent all this time to make citizens feel good.

Regardless of the extent to which community leaders heard or cared about citizen feedback at CCII, UNOP planners say that they did take citizen recommendations into account. Laurie Johnson of the Villavaso-Henry team emphasizes that the Community Congresses were one of many inputs to UNOP, but that the team learned more at each event and took the feedback seriously. Asking the veiled "footprint" question at CCI taught planners that New Orleans citizens were politically savvy and did not want a repeat of the BNOB fiasco. The feedback at Community Congress II drove the citywide team to create the disaster recovery framework that serves as a centerpiece for investment prioritization in the plan. At CCII, Johnson and other planners clearly heard that they needed to understand the situation in each neighborhood more deeply, rather than prescribing policies across them. For this reason, Johnson and her colleagues identified two main criteria for evaluating investments – repopulation and the level of flood risk – then encouraged the establishment of systems that allow city planners to continuously monitor these factors, using them as a guide for project prioritization over time. Even if leaders' responses to the substance of citizen input are not yet clear, planners say that they listened to citizens and reflected what they heard in the plan.

CCII Criticisms

Although most community leaders were remarkably supportive of the CCII process, a few criticisms arose, some minor and some more substantial. I first explain three complaints that I heard from several informants, then close by describing the views of the single informant who did not support the CCII process.

⁴¹ Interview 10.

While most people felt that AmericaSpeaks achieved an amazingly representative demographic mix at CCII, a couple of informants commented on voices that were underrepresented in the process, namely renters and Hispanics, the latter of which are a growing presence in post-Katrina New Orleans.⁴² More than half of the pre-Katrina population rented a home, whereas only 29 percent of CCII participants were renters.

Another informant, a businessman and state committee appointee, criticized CCII for failing to provide citizens with a “reality check” in terms of what is financially and politically possible for flood protection. He explained that citizens’ number one priority at CCII – namely, category five flood protection – was not realistic, yet leaders and planners did not attempt to provide more accurate information.

The honest answer is that for ten years, we’re gonna be exposed. ... [There is] a decent and an honorable way to tell [residents] the truth, but if you leave them with a survey that says 65 percent [sic] say the most important thing is category five levees, and nobody ever answers that? What kind of leader does that? ... It will serve no purpose for us to lead our citizens down the primrose path and say, “Category five levees, that’s gonna be our number one priority,” and I don’t care who’s in Congress: Democrats, Republicans – they’re not going to spend that money, not that way. ... When I found out that no one spoke up; I wished I had been there [at CCII]. There’s a delicate balance between dashing people’s hopes and telling them the truth, but you should always err on the truth side.⁴³

Finally, two problematically-worded questions at CCII raised a fair amount of criticism from leaders and the public. Both questions, one on “Roads, Transit and Utilities” and the other on “Other Public Services,” used the phrase, “greatest need,” when asking what areas should be the focus of re-building efforts and funds. UNOP planners, together with AmericaSpeaks, developed the phrase to ask if residents wanted some sort of investment prioritization versus an even distribution of resources across the city. Participants at CCII, however, interpreted the statement in one of two ways. “Greatest need” could refer to areas with the most damage, or it could refer to areas that were now the most populated and in need of the most services and infrastructure. Community leaders mostly saw the “greatest need” question as an unfortunate mistake, but a small but vocal group of participants and observers thought that the “greatest need” question condemned the CCII process. They suspected that the question’s phrasing concealed some sort of agenda. UNOP planners announced that they would throw out the results from the two questions. One informant witnessed public debate about the botched questions at a later district-level meeting. She says that most people did not suspect ulterior motives, but were concerned with making sure that the inaccurately interpreted questions were struck from the record.⁴⁴

In addition to these smaller concerns, one local leader, an entrepreneur and city committee appointee, had substantial concerns about CCII, AmericaSpeaks, and UNOP in general. It is important to note that these concerns represent the views of one individual and it is unclear to what extent he is emblematic of a particular set of New Orleanians. As I explain below, very few other informants had even heard similar complaints.

⁴² Interviews 12, 19.

⁴³ Interview 10.

⁴⁴ One issue that was lost in the controversy over these questions was the unfortunate fact that the confusing wording resulted in an unclear mandate from the public to the UNOP planners. The issue of where to concentrate resources is at the heart of many of the bitterest disagreements about rebuilding New Orleans. The planners satisfied many by striking the flawed responses from the record, but as a result, the planners did not have complete guidance on citizen’s preferences in regards to this crucial issue.

In general, this individual was very concerned about developing a solid plan that could be funded and implemented.⁴⁵ At the outset of UNOP, he was relieved to see a comprehensive project with generous funding from Rockefeller. As the process moved forward, however, he came to believe that the citywide planning team mismanaged the process by focusing on, “feel-good bullshit,” to the exclusion of detailed planning. “Democracy,” he insists, “is not a way to make a plan.” In fact, he says that if he had it to do over, he would have recommended that his committee not agree to participate in UNOP.

While he is pleased with the district-level plans, he sees no “meat” to the citywide plan – no details that can guide funding and implementation. He uses the analogy of an office supply business. UNOP, he explains, says that “staples are good,” rather than telling him how much staples cost and how many buyers there will be, along with other crucial details. He especially worries that “everybody is talking about what they want, but no one is talking about where the money will come from.” Moreover, he thinks that some of the issues that the plan addresses, such as flood protection and education, are not within the city’s purview.

In terms of CCII, he questions the purpose of the event, the motivations of AmericaSpeaks and the UNOP team, and the inclusion of residents that no longer live in the city. Admitting that racial mistrust in New Orleans is currently at its zenith, he says that in developing CCII, “AmericaSpeaks was motivated by race” and a desire to “engender trust,” rather than aiming to develop the best plan. While others praise AmericaSpeaks’ achievement of representative participation, he dislikes the fact that the mix was “engineered to be that way.” For instance, he considers providing childcare and transportation to be an unproductive form of bribery to ensure participation. If the plan moves forward, he believes that people who had to be cajoled into attending and people who participated from diaspora cities will not be there to help with implementation. For this reason, he believes their voices should not have been included at CCII. He argues, “New Orleans is not 68 percent Black now, so it’s artificial,” to have that mix of participants.

Ultimately, he feels that CCII was another example of an organization from outside New Orleans (AmericaSpeaks in this case) coming in to “enhance its resume” and attract “the spotlight.” At the crux of the issue, perhaps, is that he says, “people like me,” (i.e. white, privileged, and from dry neighborhoods) were not well-represented at CCII: “We were at Community Congress I, but they didn’t want our input because we weren’t the right demographics.” At times during the UNOP process, he says he has felt “like a TV camera,” forced to watch and listen, but unable to do or say anything.

Although it is important to note that views like this do exist, most informants were highly pleased with CCII and AmericaSpeaks. As noted above, all informants but this one were convinced that the CCII process demonstrably advanced UNOP’s credibility, specifically because AmericaSpeaks attracted a demographically representative mix of participants. Other informants also disagreed with this individual’s contention that members of the diaspora would not come back to New Orleans, saying that given adequate housing and job opportunities, these residents would return and therefore should have a voice in the process. Finally, most informants valued AmericaSpeaks intensive outreach efforts and attempts to make participation accessible through providing food, childcare, transportation, and translation. While this individual fundamentally disliked the AmericaSpeaks model and its manifestation at CCII, his views did not resonate with the positive comments of other community leaders.

⁴⁵ The comments in the remainder of this section come from Interview 6, unless otherwise noted.

THE FUTURE OF UNOP

Back in January 2007, New Orleans' leaders were quick to point out that, at the end of the day, the real test of UNOP will be not just whether it earned public support, but also whether it received official approval, adequate funding, and moved to implementation. The plan was ultimately approved by the LRA in late June 2007, but not without substantial wrangling at the City Planning Commission level. This section describes leaders' reflections during the early weeks of UNOP's release. First, I report on how they compare New Orleans' various planning processes looking back over the last year. Then I briefly review the process of UNOP approval and ongoing concerns about implementing the plan. Finally, I consider the future of public participation in New Orleans following the UNOP process.

Reflections on UNOP Compared to Past Processes

As the UNOP planning process drew to a close, asking community leaders to compare Bring New Orleans Back and the Lambert process with UNOP revealed some additional reflections on the value of public participation. As a rule, community leaders spoke with one voice when thinking back on the two earlier processes, suggesting that New Orleans' leaders are well on their way to developing a collective narrative to explain the city's planning mishaps. On the whole, community leaders these days agree that most of the BNOB plan, with the exception of the controversial land use maps, was "a technical success" or "good on a theoretical level."⁴⁶ The problem, they agree, was the "top down" approach in which "millionaires," were the face of the BNOB plan.⁴⁷ Dr. Triplett explained, "People were ready to be engaged but instead they got a map with green dots." Andy Kopplin agrees that "the appropriate deliberative process wasn't well utilized and that set everything backwards." Given the public outcry that followed BNOB, local leaders agree that, "in terms of public momentum, it proved useless."⁴⁸

The Lambert process, on the other hand, earned praise for its neighborhood-level participation, but criticism for its technical quality as a plan. Whereas BNOB was called "useless" in terms of momentum, some leaders agreed that the Lambert plan was "useless in terms of policy recommendations."⁴⁹ Dr. Triplett describes the Lambert process in the following way:

[It] was, I think, less a technical success, but more a social success because of the fact that people did at that point feel stronger and more able to engage, but I think it was a very unrealistic process because it gave people the impression that planning a city meant, 'I want a Baskin Robbins to go here and a Target to go here and this is what I want it to look like.' ... [It did] not really give people a real sort of indication of what this would all entail and that those sort of aesthetic things, while important, would be the last thing done.

On the whole, New Orleans' leaders expressed hope that UNOP might serve as the culmination of these two processes by marrying technical expertise with public engagement to move a plan for rebuilding the city forward.

⁴⁶ Interview 5; Interview 17.

⁴⁷ Interview 4, 5, 8, 15, and 17.

⁴⁸ Interview 15.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

UNOP's Approval Process and Prospects for Implementation

The process for UNOP approval was lengthy and multi-tiered, including its own more traditional public participation opportunities. The plan was first presented to the CSO and the CSF at the CSO's final meeting on January 25, 2007. Upon approval of the plan by the CSF, it was submitted to the City Planning Commission. Originally, UNOP's designers anticipated that ultimate approval of the plan would take place in late March or April, but the City Planning Commission required additional time to review the document.⁵⁰ They eventually approved the plan on May 23, 2007.⁵¹ A month later, the City Council passed a motion expressing their support for the UNOP plan.⁵² The final step in UNOP approval took place in late June when the LRA endorsed the citywide recovery plan, which Dr. Blakely presented as the combined product of UNOP and earlier planning processes. In this section, I review UNOP's road to approval, as well as discussing ongoing concerns about funding and prospects for implementation.

UNOP's Road to Approval

The lengthiest UNOP review process took place at the City Planning Commission level, as some informants anticipated.⁵³ Having been cut out of so many preceding planning processes, the city staff and the planning commission attempted to reassert its control over city planning during UNOP review. Even before receiving the UNOP plan, Executive Director Yolanda Rodriguez anticipated that she and the CPC would make some changes to the document. A month and a half later, the *Times-Picayune* quoted Ms. Rodriguez as saying that her staff has proposed "significant revisions" to the plan.⁵⁴ In a CPC hearing on March 7, 2007, Chair Tim Jackson said that his commission "inherited the UNOP process and would have done the process differently."⁵⁵

A report released two days later from the New Orleans' non-profit Bureau of Governmental Research introduced a litany of criticisms.⁵⁶ The report, entitled "Not Ready for Prime Time," suggested scuttling the Unified Plan for failing to clearly prioritize recovery projects or to take a stand on crucial, but controversial, issues, such as the viability of neighborhoods vulnerable to future flooding.⁵⁷

Even after UNOP planners revised the document in response to criticism, the CPC remained unenthused about the plan. Ultimately, the commission voted for approval in order to move the recovery process forward. Adding credence to the notion that citizen participation efforts legitimized the plan, the CPC also chose to endorse UNOP because the plan was, in their words, "the result of an unprecedented citywide planning effort and [was] supported by a broad coalition of citizens."⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Egglar, Bruce. "Planning process OK, Speakers Say," *Times-Picayune*. March 08, 2007.

⁵¹ Egglar, Bruce. "As rebuilding of N.O. continues, recovery plan OK'd," *Time Picayune*. May 23, 2007.

⁵² The Council passed this motion in order to enable LRA approval and trigger the release of CDBG funds; however, they continued to hold public hearings on the plan after this preliminary motion. (Egglar, Bruce. "Council Endorses Recovery Blueprint," *Times Picayune*. June 22, 2007.)

⁵³ A state committee appointee accurately predicted some "hew and cry" and "gnashing of teeth" at the CPC level (Interview 10).

⁵⁴ Egglar 2007b.

⁵⁵ Stoops, Elizabeth. Notes on the March 7, 2007 City Planning Commission Public Hearing on the UNOP document.

⁵⁶ Lynes (Poco) Sloss, a member of the City Planning Commission, also chairs the board of the Bureau of Governmental Research. The Bureau reports that he recused himself from issues relating to the production of this report.

⁵⁷ Bureau of Governmental Research. *Not Ready for Prime Time: An Analysis of the UNOP Citywide Plan*. March 2007.

⁵⁸ Egglar, Bruce. "City Plan Gets Lukewarm Reviews," *Time Picayune*. May 22, 2007.

While the CPC fought over UNOP revisions, Dr. Blakely moved forward with his own list of 17 citywide planning priorities.⁵⁹ Although some observers expressed uncertainty over how Blakely's plan "meshed" with UNOP, the two plans were subsequently approved as a package by the City Council and the LRA.⁶⁰

At the City Council level, Councilmember Cynthia Willard-Lewis, an early opponent of UNOP, was co-chair of the approval process. Even though she continued to complain that UNOP had been unnecessary given the earlier Lambert process, the Council approved UNOP quickly and unanimously.^{61, 62} Three days later, the LRA approved UNOP (along with Dr. Blakely's priorities) as New Orleans' citywide recovery program.⁶³ Like the CPC, the LRA explicitly linked UNOP's approval to its citizen participation component. In a press release the LRA submitted, the agency lauded UNOP as "a citizen-driven recovery vision for the entire city of New Orleans which was developed with unprecedented participation and representation from every part of the city including displaced citizens."⁶⁴

Will the Plan Receive Adequate Funding?

Now that the plan has passed, the next step for the city is to find funds for implementation. The LRA's Andy Kopplin says that the big discussion following UNOP's public release focused on the plan's \$14.5 billion price tag. The shortfall in funding is projected at \$9 billion. Leaders are keenly aware that full funding to implement citywide recovery is not yet in any budget. An aide to the Mayor worried that Nagin, would "have to get bloodied in order to convince people that the city doesn't have the money."⁶⁵ But most leaders are enthusiastic about having a plan that enables them to provide potential funders with a roadmap. Dr. Francis believed that the approved plan would allow the various recovery agencies and players to "speak with one voice about what needs to be done and how much money will be necessary."

Can the Plan be Implemented?

Even if New Orleans gathers adequate funds to re-build, an all-together separate issue is whether the Unified Plan actually provides enough guidance on the specifics of implementing recovery projects. This question remains unresolved, but community leaders did offer some early insights in January 2007. Those who favored the direct approach of the BNOB plan, worried that UNOP does not make the tough decisions necessary to keep New Orleans residents safe in the future. Andy Kopplin hears these criticisms, but defends UNOP:

⁵⁹ Dr. Blakely arrived in New Orleans when the UNOP plan was nearing completion, and therefore played little role in the planning process or original recommendations. From the beginning of his tenure, Blakely asserted his independence, saying that his office would not entirely adopt any single plan. He did, however, defend the Unified Plan against criticism, calling it an "important and fundamental document" (Egglar 2007a).

⁶⁰ Egglar, Bruce. "As rebuilding of N.O. continues, recovery plan OK'd," *Time Picayune*. May 23, 2007.

⁶¹ One Councilmember was absent. (Egglar, Bruce. "Council Endorses Recovery Blueprint," *Times Picayune*. June 22, 2007.)

⁶² A top aide to the Mayor said that the city was ready to "own" the plan, ending what this person calls an, "unhealthy codependency between the public sector and private organizations." The aide suggested that the city was ready to say to planners and other organizations that have offered assistance, "Thanks, but please go away." Interview 15.

⁶³ Krupa, Michelle. "LRA Approves New Orleans Recovery Plan," *Times Picayune*. June 25, 2007.

⁶⁴ "LRA Transfers \$627.5 Million to Address Projected Road Home Shortfall; State's Commitment Tops \$1 Billion." <http://www.lra.louisiana.gov/pr062507meeting.html>. June 25, 2007.

⁶⁵ Interview 15.

The UNOP plan realistically assesses where we are today from a political perspective. It has a process for prioritization but no “thou shalt not” constraints. It advocates neighborhood-by-neighborhood clustering that minimizes the negatives of jack-o-lanterning⁶⁶ in a practical and pragmatic way, cognizant of the context of public view in New Orleans.

As noted earlier, the UNOP process never intended to produce a politically divisive map, particularly not a map that recommended changes to New Orleans’ physical footprint. For many observers, the greater political savvy of the plan – turning to compromises like voluntary clustering in existing neighborhoods, rather than declaring some neighborhoods unviable – was a virtue. It is this approach, however, that has raised the greatest criticism for the plan. The aforementioned Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR) report criticizes the Unified Plan for failing to take a tough stance on this issue:

[The Unified Plan] explains at length the higher vulnerability of eastern New Orleans. It also espouses safety as a guiding principle. But, having set off alarm bells, it does not follow its findings through with comprehensive remedies for that area or its residents. In fact, it recommends significant funding for resettlement of people living in areas at a high risk of future flooding without requiring that the resettlement areas be located at lower-risk sites.⁶⁷

For UNOP’s planners, the public participation process took the option of shrinking New Orleans’ footprint off the table. The planners responded by offering the city a framework for prioritizing rebuilding and offering citizens incentives for clustered re-building, without issuing mandates. The Bureau’s report argues that allowing residents to re-build without clear boundaries is irresponsible. Moreover, it charges that the Unified Plan provides insufficient information to connect ideas to funding and implementation. If the Bureau is right, UNOP could turn out to be politically savvy, but functionally useless. It is also clear, however, that no plan that advocates tougher limits on re-building will enjoy public support. In vetting the Unified Plan, the City Planning Commission faced the complex task of balancing these competing priorities.

New Orleans Participation Post-UNOP

My interviews did not all directly probe the question of where citizen engagement would go in New Orleans once the UNOP process ended, but a few informants and city officials in particular offered views on the questions. Planner Laurie Johnson and CSF member Joe Williams both believed that the public would be more supportive of UNOP because of their role in its creation. Ms. Johnson explains:

Watching people now, they have an investment in this process and they were part of it and they were heard. They may not like all of [the plan] but they were heard. Before they trash it they’re going to think about it.

Williams agreed with this point and went on to say:

I think that when you have a population that’s been actively involved in a planning process, they’ll never be docile again. So with that being the case, despite the perceived economic influence of those who may think differently, I think the citizenry has come to realize it’s own power. And that’s represented by the Congress [CCII].

⁶⁶ “Jack-o-lanterning” refers to a pattern of develop in which stretches of uninhabited buildings are punctuated by a scattered inhabited buildings. This type of dispersed re-development presents problems for New Orleans because it has to provide services to whole areas in which only a few residents have returned.

⁶⁷ Bureau of Governmental Research, 2007.

City employees from the Mayor's office and the CPC did not take this view. Dr. Blakely believed that neighborhood organizations will "die out" as soon as the plan begins to work, since New Orleans has no sustained tradition of this type of civic organization. He also worried that because of New Orleans issues with corruption, neighborhood associations could become "shakedown operations." Dr. Blakely expressed an interest in finding a way to build on participation efforts, but he wants to channel these efforts carefully and create civic norms, such as declared meetings and other transparency measures. Yolanda Rodriguez at the CPC agreed that she, too, would like to see neighborhood participation continue, but seemed reluctant to change or supplement the traditional public hearing model that the city uses for feedback. A Mayoral advisor echoed both Blakely and Rodriguez, saying, "don't let a thousand flowers bloom," in terms of participation. This aide believed that after the "parallel process" of UNOP, citizens need to be channeled back into traditional institutions, such as the public hearing. While some political leaders, such as Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell were clearly excited about the possibility of new forms of citizen engagement, attempts at more far-reaching change in participation would likely receive some pushback from City Hall.

Since the release of UNOP, public hearings have attracted high levels of participation. On March 7, 2007, 200 residents attended the City Planning Commission's second public hearing on UNOP. A major theme of comments at the event related to sustaining the participation generated by the UNOP process.⁶⁸ A new organization called the Planning Districts' Leadership Coalition, which includes representative from New Orleans' 13 planning districts, issued a statement that requested the city's cooperation in developing a formal structure for sustained public participation.⁶⁹

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research has provided insights on leaders' views of UNOP and its public participation component, it raises additional unanswered questions that deserve attention in future work. I list some topics for further exploration below.

- *How did public participation affect the substance of the ultimate plan?* Comparing public input structures and data with the resulting plans for BNOB, Lambert, and UNOP, this research would identify the similarities and differences between the input and the resultant plan, and consider how the different levels of input and types of participation affected the recommendations that went into and came out of the plans.
- *How does the history of civic engagement in New Orleans relate to post-hurricane public involvement?* This research would enable greater understanding of the challenges of engaging New Orleans residents, as well as enhancing understanding of the city's pre-Katrina social capital. This effort could serve as a first step in evaluating how civic engagement changes over time as New Orleans rebuilds.
- *How did ordinary residents of New Orleans and the hurricane diaspora respond to UNOP's citizen participation opportunities and the resulting substance of the plan?* Since some public leaders considered the citizens' input as merely useful for "buy-in," it is important to consider the extent to which citizens feel that planners listened and city officials ratified the public's input.

⁶⁸ Egger, 2007b.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

In addition to these supplemental questions, a more thorough review of the role of public participation in the UNOP plan would include follow-up interviews with the same informants interviewed here following approval of the UNOP plan and then several months into implementation.

CONCLUSION

Interviews with 20 New Orleans public leaders indicated that CCII enhanced the credibility of UNOP in their eyes by gathering a representative mix of citizen voices and enabling conversation across differences. As the process moves forward, many questions remain as to whether citizens' recommendations will continue to drive the process and whether the plan, as it stands, can be funded and implemented. Nonetheless, the experience of CCII in New Orleans indicates the extraordinary power that large-scale participation processes like AmericaSpeaks can have in terms of building political momentum for a process. The event generated support from leaders and enabled UNOP to recover from its rocky start and the suspicions raised after CCI.

Earlier in this report, I quoted Dr. Vera Triplett, a woman who felt inspired to participate in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. As the volunteer chair of the CSO, Dr. Triplett was perhaps the most active citizen participant in the entire process. Dr. Triplett said that UNOP started out on "shaky" ground and agreed that CCII contributed substantially to building its credibility. As she looks to the future, however, she points out that UNOP still faces risks, saying:

One bad word, one wrong move, one stupid map, and it all blows up. ... People need to see something go to implementation. This city cannot, will not survive another failed planning process. It just can't happen. ... For us, for our city, everything is at stake.

The final two Community Congresses of the UNOP process, CCII and CIII, represented moments of hope for New Orleans. After months of political rancor, citizens came together, discussed, and ultimately expressed support for a plan for recovery. While the ultimate fate of UNOP implementation remains uncertain, the City Planning Commission and the Louisiana Recovery Authority specifically cited the involvement of a diverse range of New Orleans citizens as a key reason to endorse UNOP as the city's roadmap to recovery.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

New Orleans Public Leader Interviews

By Archon Fung with revisions by Abby Williamson

Interviewer: Abby Williamson
Dates: January 17-20
Location: Informants' offices, New Orleans, Louisiana
Interview Length: 45-60 mins

Interview Objectives:

Document New Orleans public leaders' views about:

- (1) The credibility, legitimacy, and likely success of UNOP process
- (2) The effect of CC on the UNOP process
- (3) The prospects of UNOP compared to (a) Bring New Orleans Back and (b) Lambert neighborhood planning processes

Interview Outline:

The extent to and ways in which these items will be probed will differ somewhat across interviews, but the aim is to come away with knowledge about these topics from each informant.

1. Subject background
2. View of UNOP
 - 2a. describe process [listen here for relative emphasis of roles]
 - 2b. early views
 - 2c. current views
 - 2d. views of supporters and opponents
 - 2e. prospects for success
3. Role of CC in UNOP and role of citizens
 - 3a. opinions about the role and importance of CC in the larger UNOP
 - 3b. did CC bring in new voices and people, or same parties as before
 - 3c. difference the involvement of the diaspora makes
 - 3d. difference that scale, technology, and visibility makes
 - 3e. what did subject hear as solid recommendations from CC2
 - 3f. will these recommendations be incorporated into UNOP final plan?
4. Similarities and differences from (a) Bring New Orleans Back and (b) Lambert
 - 4a. who is involved in it
 - 4b. who leads it
 - 4c. supporters and opponents
 - 4d. overall credibility
 - 4e. substantive recommendations
 - 4f. prospects for success

Introduction:

Let me just remind you a bit about what I'm doing. I'm a researcher from Harvard University's Kennedy School, interested generally in issues of civic engagement. My colleagues at the Kennedy School hope to learn how public participation has impacted UNOP and its prospects for success. I'm really looking for your frank views on this subject, whatever they may be.

With your permission, I'd like to tape the interview, but if at any time you'd like me to turn the recorder off, I'd be happy to do so. The findings from these interviews will go into a report for my colleagues and those working on the UNOP project and may feed into publications at a later date. For the most part, my plan would be to attribute your comments to you, using your name, but if you wanted to say something without attribution, just let me know and I'll ensure that it remains anonymous. Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Questions:

1. Subject background

Abby will research this background prior to interview and only ask follow-up questions if necessary.

2. Views of UNOP

- To begin with, can you tell me a bit about how you think UNOP is going? Particularly, what are the most important successes or failures you see so far?
- Back when UNOP was just getting started in mid-2006, were you hopeful or skeptical about UNOP?
 - *Follow up:* Can you tell me more about why?
- *If view has changed:* It sounds like you were pretty [hopeful/skeptical] to begin with. What happened to change your view?
- Early on, who were the important supporters and critics of UNOP?
- From what you've seen, have any of these people changed their minds?
 - *Follow up:* What do you think changed their minds?
- What do you see as UNOP's prospects for success – will an actionable plan come out of all this?
 - *Follow up:* What are the main obstacles to making it work?

3. Role of CC in UNOP

- As you know, three Community Congresses are part of the larger UNOP process. What do you see as the role of the Congresses in UNOP?
- Did the Congresses bring in people or perspectives that hadn't been involved in the rebuilding

process, or did pretty much the same people and groups participate?

- *Follow up:* What new voices did you hear from? Did they have new ideas or perspectives to contribute, or was it pretty much same old, same old?
- What about the New Orleans diaspora – in contrast with other earlier efforts, did the Congresses bring in those voices and perspectives?
 - *Follow up:* What kind of difference do you think this made? (*Looking for whether and how this affected legitimacy of plan, and who cared about this*)
- The organizers of the Community Congress process have tried to design it in a way so that public participation is highly visible. Has the publicity worked in terms of informing various stakeholders about a process?
 - *Follow up:* What kind of difference do you think this made? (*Looking for whether and how this affected legitimacy of plan, and who cared about this*)
- In general, what kind of recommendations did you see coming out of the first two Community Congresses? I've read the reports, but I'm curious about what you took away from the meetings.
- Looking toward the future, do you think these recommendations will be incorporated into the plans that result from UNOP?
 - *Follow up:* Why? OR Why not?
- Did you learn anything new or reconsider any of your opinions based on what you learned at the community congresses?
 - *Follow up:* Who or what in particular influenced your thinking?

4. Comparison with “Bring New Orleans Back” and Lambert Process

- I just have a few more questions on the similarities and differences between UNOP and two of the large efforts that preceded it — “Bring New Orleans Back” and the Lambert process. Would you say that these processes differ in terms of the extent to which they are taken seriously by various groups like the public, the government, media, planners, etc.?
 - *Follow up:* Which seems to have the most credibility with the various groups?
- What do you expect to be the most important differences in the recommendations and plans that these three processes generate?

5. Other Comments

Has anything else come up for you as we've been talking – are there things I haven't touched on that I should know about the role of the congresses in the UNOP process?

That's really all of my questions. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. If you ever wanted to follow-up about anything, you have my card. I really appreciate your thoughts on all of this.

APPENDIX B: INFORMANT LIST

My informants included the following 20 individuals, listed in order from first to last interview. The descriptions below offer a sense of the informants' position, role in the UNOP process, and demographic characteristics. For the four informants who requested anonymity, I will refer to them in the manner described below.

1. **Ms. Carey Shea**, Rockefeller Foundation, Associate Director-New Orleans; Community Support Organization Advisory Team Member – white
2. **Mr. Wayne Lee**, Attorney and Chair, Commercial Litigation Practice, Stone Pigman LLC; Chair, Community Support Foundation Board – African-American
3. **Dr. Norman Francis**, President, Xavier University; Chair, Louisiana Recovery Authority – African-American
4. **Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell**, District D City Councilmember; Community Support Organization Advisory Team Member – African-American
5. **Dr. Vera Triplett**, Assistant Professor of Counseling, Our Lady of Holy Cross College; Chair, Community Support Organization Advisory Team – African-American
6. Anonymous businessman
7. **Mr. Tarence Davis**, Director of Athletics, Algiers Charter Schools Association; Community Support Organization Advisory Team Member – African-American
8. **Mr. Joe Williams**, Executive Director, New Orleans Recovery Authority, Community Support Foundation Board – African-American
9. **Ms. Yolanda Rodriguez**, Executive Director, City Planning Commission – African-American
10. Anonymous businessman
11. **Councilmember Arnie Fielkow**, City Councilmember-at-Large – white
12. **Ms. Virginia Blaque**, constituent outreach staff, Councilmember Arnie Fielkow's office
13. **Dr. Edward Blakely**, Executive Director of Recovery Management – African-American
14. **Ms. HMK Amen**, Attorney in private practice, Community Support Organization Advisory Team Member – African-American
15. Anonymous member of the Mayor's staff
16. **Ms. Donna Fraiche**, Shareholder and Attorney, Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell, & Berkowitz; Louisiana Recovery Authority, Board of Directors – white
17. **Mr. Andy Kopplin**, Executive Director, Louisiana Recovery Authority – white
18. Anonymous media observer
19. **Ms. Laurie Johnson**, disaster recovery planner, Villavaso-Henry team – white
20. **Ms. Kim Boyle**, Partner, Phelps Dunbar LLP; Bring New Orleans Back Commission Member, Louisiana Recovery Authority; Community Support Foundation Board - African-American

SOURCES

- Bring New Orleans Back Urban Planning Committee. "Action Plan for New Orleans, Executive Summary." January 30, 2006. Available at: <http://bringneworleansback.com/Portals/BringNewOrleansBack/Resources/EX%20SUMMARY%201-30-06.pdf>. Accessed March 12, 2007.
- Bureau of Governmental Research. *Not Ready for Prime Time: An Analysis of the UNOP Citywide Plan*. March 2007.
- Egglar, Bruce. "N.O. recovery plan called a muddle: Watchdog group urges fresh analysis," *Time Picayune*. March 06, 2007.
- Egglar, Bruce. "Planning process OK, Speakers Say," *Times-Picayune*. March 08, 2007.
- Egglar, Bruce. "As rebuilding of N.O. continues, recovery plan OK'd," *Time Picayune*. May 23, 2007.
- Egglar, Bruce. "UNOP Citywide Plan Wins Approval," *Time Picayune*. June 14, 2007.
- Egglar, Bruce. "Council Endorses Recovery Blueprint," *Times Picayune*. June 22, 2007.
- Horne, Jedidiah and Brendan Nee. "An Overview of Post-Katrina Planning in New Orleans," unpublished manuscript. October 18, 2006. Available at www.nolaplans.com. Accessed March 11, 2007.)
- Krupa, Michelle. "LRA Approves New Orleans Recovery Plan," *Times Picayune*. June 25, 2007.
- "LRA Transfers \$627.5 Million to Address Projected Road Home Shortfall; State's Commitment Tops \$1 Billion." <http://www.lra.louisiana.gov/pr062507meeting.html>. June 25, 2007.
- Maggi, Laura. "LRA plan favors those who remain," *Times-Picayune*. Tuesday, February 21, 2006.
- Stoops, Elizabeth. Notes on the March 7, 2007 City Planning Commission Public Hearing on the Unified Plan.
- Unified New Orleans Plan. *Community Congress III Discussion Guide*. January 20, 2007.