

**Presentation by Charles C. Allen, FAICP
Vice Mayor and Member of the City Council
of Newport News, Virginia
to the House Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the
Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina
House of Representatives
Congress of the United States
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Good afternoon:

My name is Charles C. Allen, and I am a member of the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Planners and a local elected public official. I serve on the City Council of the City of Newport News, Virginia, as an elected Council member, representing the South District Seat A. I have served as Vice Mayor since 1996, being re-elected to that position five (5) times by City Council. I am an urban planner by profession and provide consultant services as a sole proprietor. I have 43 years of professional experience working as an urban planner, both as a private consultant and as a public servant. My work has primarily been at the local and regional level. At the regional level, I have served on and currently serve on several regional commissions and boards. I am not a citizen of New Orleans or the State of Louisiana, therefore my view is one of an elected official and an urban planner. I have not visited New Orleans or the Gulf Coast since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck those areas.

My initial observation is that the citizens of New Orleans were clearly not prepared for Hurricane Katrina, and probably, until they were devastated by it, had no clear understanding of the system of categorizing hurricanes and the projected force that such storms carry across the areas they hit. Yet, it is clear, from information in the news, that the U.S. Government, in the form of the U.S. weather service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the U.S.

Army Corps of Engineers, understood the magnitude of this storm. Individually, what City can respond to natural a disaster of Katrina's magnitude? It appears we have not learned to efficiently deal with natural disasters and convey the appropriate information, not only to local elected officials, but to citizens who would be impacted by these predictable storms - predictable in terms of the direction and force of their wind and rain. We expect a municipality to coordinate, move and provide for its citizens, when the most effective protection is to relocate out of their municipality into other jurisdictions, in this case over 100 miles away. We permit each citizen who is capable to act as an individual, thereby creating mass confusion and disruption nullifying any chance a local government has to manage an orderly evacuation. How does our national and state governments expect to move tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people, in individual cars over highways that cannot handle the average daily commuter traffic which is regional in its origin and destination? No mayor can control regional highways, especially Interstate highways. When Katrina was designated as a Category 5 Hurricane, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must have known the probable flooding risk and knew that the two primary shelters would be isolated by the resultant flooding. In all of the articles I have read, no one spoke of an audible alarm when the levees broke. People did not know the water was coming, though they should have known a Category 5 Hurricane would breach or destroy the levees, which according to recent reports, were not built sufficient to withstand a storm of Katrina's magnitude. The responsible agency knew the problem a Category 5 storm could impose and knew that the people sheltered at the Superdome and the Convention Center would have to stay for more than a couple of nights. They knew that the basin formed by the levees and the high ground would flood to a significant height and flood waters could not be drained except by pump. In Newport News, I formulated a citizen based comprehensive

planning program that, through an outstanding staff, developed into an award winning program. The essence of the program was not paternalistic. If I can understand the issue, then the public can. The process of dumbing down information provided citizens is undemocratic and does not allow them to vote. Citizens understand issues and information. That they have learned through the trauma of Katrina by impacting their choices now. Had these citizens been informed in a manner that would have demonstrated the projected destruction of a Category 5 Hurricane and provided adequate transportation to evacuate, what we saw displayed to the world would have been minimized.

FEMA knew or should have known that the people critical to provide services in this crisis, public service workers of all categories would be impacted by this storm and the need to care for their families would be paramount. If you had 100 people from each state, that would provide, within 8 hours, 5000 people to man the emergency response program, embattled resident public service employees could care for their families if needed. It is incomprehensible to me that federal aid does not include funds to maintain the local municipal workforce. I was stunned when the Mayor of New Orleans announced that City employees would have to be suspended from work because of lack of financial resources that provided funds for payroll and other expenses. The U.S. government could enter into private contracts for billions of dollars, yet could not assist a municipal government to maintain its primary workforce in such a critical time. In the midst of this crisis, local government was made virtually ineffective.

As a former Tank and Infantry Company Commander from active reserve and National Guard Service, I know that each military unit at the company level has a field kitchen and the U.S. Army Quarter Master has portable latrines. Yet, one saw none of these resources mobilized to provide assistance to those citizens of New Orleans and other places.

Housing statistics, ownership, occupancy, number of units, etc., told the government that in the worst hit areas there were a significant number of rental units. Most of these are uninhabitable now. This has created a lack of available units. Rents tripled, from \$500 to \$1500 a month. Federal and State legislation should provide the municipality the enabling statutes to immediately impose rent control over this unscrupulous reaction to the crisis. Provide landlords a method of protection immediately so they will rehabilitate buildings that they are reluctant to do because of the threat of the failure of pumps and levees in the future.

Citizens expect government regulations to protect their interest in the private commerce or marketplace. The tremendous number of uninsured and inadequately insured property owners clearly required both advice and assistance. It requires the complex and legal area of insurance and regulations that our citizens, especially those who suffer from natural disasters, need more protection afforded by their governments and the old rule of buyer beware is inappropriate in this democracy where citizens are victimized. They need protection provided by the government and country they are loyal to and protect.

The bonding companies, Dow Jones and Standard and Poors, rate the City of Newport News, not only on our repayment record, and the health of our tax base, but just as importantly on the amount of funds we have in escrow to repay over indebtedness in case we suffer a decline in revenues for whatever causes, including natural disasters. They require approximately 10% of the total bonded debt be set aside in an unappropriated balance account. Natural disasters occur each and every year. Why isn't our national government financially prepared for these occurrences? If it is perceived as good management for local and state government, why not the federal government, thereby reducing the need for the budget trauma that occurs nationally each time a natural disaster strikes.

Critical to the process is how the City of New Orleans proceeds in the clean-up of the City where it is proposed that demolition/clearance be utilized is the protection of its citizens' investment in real property. The other issues are the assessment of taxes and the cost of demolition of these properties, and whether the properties will be liened for the recovery of these costs. During the period 1950 - 1975, each State enacted statutes to permit urban renewal, and the Uniform Relocation Act of 1970, as amended, applied to programs using federal aid. If the urban renewal process is utilized, this will require a legal method of determining ownership and conditions to include properties be demolished.

Based on the information I have received, in Louisiana, this is Statute 4625. Parish Redevelopment Law. In my opinion, local, state and federal governments would best serve our communities by seeking to establish processes that protect the real property investment of the African American Community, and thereby the community-at-large.

Neo-traditional planning and new urbanism, as I understand, seek to reestablish the urban pattern as it exists in some of our older cities i.e., Charleston and New Orleans, yet the land use pattern and infrastructure development cannot proceed the critical question of whether we can protect these communities in the future. Whether the City of New Orleans follows the Galveston model of raising the land of the City, or the Netherlands method of protection by sea walls and pumps, this critical decision must come first. My advocacy is that citizens, especially land owners, are involved in the process in which these decisions are made. The planning for human resources must accompany the physical planning and, as such, greatly influences those physical development decisions.

There will be an abundance of plans and redevelopment concepts for New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The City of New Orleans and the regional agencies which served the City should

be the lead agencies in this redevelopment effort and the planning should be community based. Concepts, such as the Louisiana Recovery Corporation, proposed in HR 4100, replaces local government's historical role that has been re-enforced throughout sixty years of housing, urban renewal and community development, primarily funded by the U.S. government. Note that the local municipality has no appointments to the Board of Directors of this corporation. It is a paternalistic heavy handed process and based as no proven record that the U.S. government can administer local government better than the local elected government.

This historical storm demonstrated the lack of coordinated planning at all levels of government. Lets not repeat that mistake in the recovery and redevelopment of this great American City.