



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

Let your voice be heard in rebuilding the Greater New Orleans Area


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City Business

Commentary: Business leaders demand levee board reform

December 16, 2005

Business and residents' group Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans has collected more than over 45,000 signatures from area citizens on petitions and letters from area business leaders insisting Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco and state legislators call a January legislative session to enact Levee Board reform for long-term levee safety. The group was founded about two weeks ago.

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans was formed out of frustration at the response to levee safety by Blanco and Louisiana Legislators, said founder Ruthie Frierson. People of New Orleans are fed up. Many residents lost jobs, homes and possessions and are enraged that Louisiana politicians are still playing games with their lives, Frierson said. Residents are demanding safety from future flood devastation, she said.

The spontaneous formation of this group organized and energized the community, said Jay Lapeyre, chairman of the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region. Gathering significant signatures in just two weeks demonstrates citizens of Louisiana are no longer accepting politics as usual. They are rising in anger against patronage politics and special interest deal making by the political elite.

Business Council members and petitioners all recognize citizen safety from flooding is top priority, said Business Council member Tom Oreck, president and CEO of the Oreck Corp. If residents and businesses are not convinced the city is safe from further preventable devastation by flooding, they simply will not return to Greater New Orleans and others will not remain, he said.

The risk of New Orleans' economic collapse is real, Oreck said, and it will continue to increase if levee reform is delayed. Clearly the system did not provide adequate protection, said Business Council member Richard Bachmann, chairman and CEO of Energy Partners, Ltd. The Governor and legislators need to take decisive action to prove to citizens and businesses they should return or stay. In addition, they must demonstrate to the Federal Government that necessary funding will be spent appropriately.

Following is the complete text of the letter sent to Gov. Blanco and state legislators as signed by The Business Council of New Orleans and The River Region and Jefferson Parish Business Council members.

Dear Governor Blanco and State Legislators:

It is imperative that we have an immediate and public commitment to a Special Legislative Session in January. Press reports and House Speaker Salter's recent comments have caused grave and increasing concern.

Governor, you confirmed in your announcement Saturday, that we need to consolidate levee safety across districts, end the patronage, put experts in charge, and provide professional management focused on levee safety. Protecting the lives and property of our citizens must be this state's highest priority. Louisiana is viewed skeptically by Congress and the nation, and true levee board reform has become a litmus test of whether Louisiana can be trusted to meet the challenges of rebuilding. If we fail this test, we'll not receive the support needed to revitalize our communities.

Conversations with members of our Congressional delegation, members of Congress from other states, and coverage in the national press confirm that Louisiana needs to send an immediate, powerful, and unequivocal signal that politics-as-usual is over in Louisiana. The citizens of Greater New Orleans strongly believe we need a January session and need to enact these reforms immediately. Citizens For 1 Greater New Orleans consists of concerned citizens across our region. They came together spontaneously. In two weeks, they collected over 45,000 signed petitions demanding both a Special Session in January and levee board reform now. <http://www.citizensfor1greaterneworleans.com/>.

These petitioners all recognize that citizen safety from flooding is our top priority. The Times-Picayune reported that CEOs of Tidewater and other significant businesses, are waiting on news about levee protection before deciding whether to return to the city. The

9/5/2018

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans:

risk of economic collapse of New Orleans is real, and it will continue to increase if levee reform is delayed.

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