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Times-Picayune

New Orleans master plan approved by City Council

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Bruce Egger, The Times-Picayune

Three years after the **City Planning Commission** began seeking consultants to write **New Orleans' first master plan** and almost two years after New Orleans voters amended the City Charter to give key provisions of the plan the force of law, the **City Council** gave final approval to the document Thursday.



Susan Poag, The Times-Picayune archive.

The vote was 6-0, with Councilwoman Stacy Head absent.

The commission and its consultants spent 18 months and \$2 million creating **the voluminous document**, which is supposed to provide what the charter calls a 20-year plan "for the physical development of the city."

After Mayor **Mitch Landrieu** signs the ordinance approving the plan, which he is expected to do, the council and administration officials will be barred from making any zoning or land-use decisions that conflict with the goals, policies and strategies in the section of the document dealing with land use.

Many other parts of the plan, such as the call for a study of demolishing the elevated expressway over Claiborne Avenue, do not have any legal force.

Councilwoman Jackie Clarkson, who took the lead in pushing for approval of the plan, said its adoption will provide certainty to both residents and developers. "The rules won't change in the middle of the game," she said. "You will not be able to just whimsy and whamsy change zoning."

With the plan in place, she added, developers or others seeking approval of land-use proposals "can't go buy their four votes on any City Council. They couldn't buy it on this council anyway."

However, the charter provides that the plan can be amended as often as once a year, and it must be updated at least every five years.

Planning Director Yolanda Rodriguez said it has not been decided how soon in 2011 the first amendments will be considered. She said it could be as early as January, the first anniversary of the planning commission's original vote approving the master plan.

Meanwhile, the commission and its consultants are working on a complete revision of the city's comprehensive zoning law, which translates the broad land-use categories and principles of the master plan into specific rules about what is and is not allowed on each piece of land in the city.

Until the new zoning law is adopted, probably sometime next year, it is unclear what the commission and council will do if they are confronted with a land-use request that is legal under the old zoning law but illegal under the new master plan, or vice versa.

David Dixon, leader of the team of consultants who worked on the plan, has said that for the first time it gives New Orleans "a plan that provides a credible and legitimate basis for future public policy and decision-making regarding land use, development, zoning, city capital expenditures, transportation and similar fundamental decisions that shape the city's future."

He said its "development and urban design recommendations make clear that the persistent debate between preservation and innovation is meaningless by demonstrating that New Orleans' cultural heritage is its most potent weapon in attracting investment and talent."

After getting the version of the master plan the planning commission approved in January, the council voted in April -- a few days before three new members took office - - to send it back to the commission with calls for extensive revisions in the document's format and approach, plus scores of specific changes in its recommendations.

The commission in June turned down many of the council's suggestions, but the council had little choice Thursday but to approve the commission's final version. The charter amendment approved in 2006 gave the council only 45 days to "take final action" on the amended plan. If it failed to act within that time, the version of the plan adopted by the commission in January would take effect, the charter said.

Frances Sewell, a longtime leader of residents in part of Lower Coast Algiers, told the council Thursday that the finished plan is "a political dream, not a property owners' dream," but Dalton Savvoir, vice president of the Gentilly Civic Improvement Association, said his group supports it.

Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, whose district includes Gentilly, said she considers the plan only the first phase in a two-step process. The new zoning ordinance "is the most important piece," she said.

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