



# Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

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


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### On a Roll

The year 2006 isn't over yet, but already it is destined to be remembered as a turning point in Louisiana. In the past 12 months, citizens have become enraged and engaged like never before, and they have sustained a level of intensity and focus that is unprecedented in local and state politics. Largely as a result of public outcry -- and led by business and civic leaders as well as ordinary voters -- landmark reform legislation has passed at City Hall and in Baton Rouge. Voters likewise have approved state constitutional amendments that would have seemed unthinkable less than two years ago. The best example of that came just last week, as voters statewide and in New Orleans overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment combining the seven New Orleans assessors' offices into one. In the wake of Katrina, public-spirited citizens are on a roll.

Among the other far-reaching changes since Katrina:

Citizens adopted a constitutional amendment to merge local levee boards in the New Orleans area into two regional boards -- and mandated that the new boards focus on flood protection. Membership on the new boards also will be based on professional qualifications.

Voters approved constitutional amendments to dedicate future offshore mineral royalties and potential tobacco settlement proceeds to coastal restoration and flood protection. That action came after lawmakers created the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority and vested it with the power to supervise local levee boards -- and take over any boards that fail to do their jobs effectively and efficiently.

Lawmakers passed legislation to combine the district courts in New Orleans, until now the only parish in Louisiana with separate criminal and civil courts. The merger will occur over several years in order to keep both systems functioning until they officially become one. The deliberate pace of the merger also will give both courts time to coordinate information technology, budgeting and long-range planning. Most of the merger will be complete by 2010.

Lawmakers likewise voted to merge New Orleans' civil and criminal sheriffs and clerks' offices, and to move the city's separate mortgage and conveyance offices back into the clerk's office -- making Orleans just like every other parish. This merger also will occur over the course of several years.

Voters in September raised the minimum legal experience required of persons who seek to be elected judge -- from five years for all judges to eight for district judges and 10 for appellate judges and Supreme Court justices.

At a time when Washington, Wall Street and the world are watching New Orleans closely, these changes send a positive message about our city and our state. To be sure, we still have a lot of problems to solve, but collectively the recent reforms demonstrate that New Orleans and Louisiana are ready to cast off the shackles of corruption, cronyism and political fiefdoms that have made us a quaint but inefficient anachronism for too long.

So, what's next?

That's not a rhetorical question. With so much momentum already established, it would be a shame for this new activism to just fade from the scene. We encourage those who have worked so tirelessly for reform in the past year to keep pushing, keep raising the bar. In that spirit, we offer some suggestions for future citizen initiatives:

How about a petition drive to amend the City Charter so that the new Office of Inspector General can be given permanent status? In addition to giving the office a stronger legal foundation, a charter amendment also could restore key provisions that City Council members watered down two weeks ago when they adopted the OIG ordinance. That means clearly delineated subpoena power, genuine independence from political interference, and a source of revenue independent of City Council or mayoral meddling. Citizens can force a referendum on any charter proposition by gathering signatures from 10,000 registered New Orleans voters on a petition calling for the referendum.

For years, *Gambit Weekly* has sounded the call for an outside audit of police crime figures and an independent monitor of NOPD. If the mayor, the council and the police chief won't

give it to us, let's put that into the charter as well.

It's long past time New Orleans had a master land-use plan with the force of law. Literally every four years candidates for mayor and City Council parade before voters (and through our offices) promising to deliver a real master plan for the city. Time and again they forget that promise once in office. The reason that happens is obvious: council members raise most of their campaign cash from individuals and entities seeking changes in land-use ordinances and regulations. Let's get the council out of the business of zoning and land-use. Maybe then it will focus on the budget, crime, economic development and other matters that improve the quality of life and the efficacy of city government.

The New Orleans and Jefferson Parish councils met in a joint session last week to begin exploring ways to work together. Let's move quickly beyond the photo-ops and get regional cooperation on delivery of major services such as trash pickup, coroners' facilities, crime labs and regional transit.

If Katrina has taught us anything, it's that we get the government we demand. Let's all demand better.

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