



# The Times-Picayune

## Approach to N.O. Business Addressed

### Horizon Initiative Looks for What Works

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By Ronette King

**Business writer**

Citing examples of places such as Miami, San Antonio and Charlotte, N.C., that have reinvented themselves through focused economic development, some New Orleans business people are trying to reshape the way development is pursued in the Crescent City.

A newly created group called the Horizon Initiative is pushing to consolidate New Orleans' efforts at economic rebirth under a long-term public-private partnership that would be less influenced by local politics because its leaders would not be appointed by changing mayoral administrations. Councilman Arnie Fielkow has nurtured the concept and says that within the next 60 days, he plans to propose such a partnership to the City Council Economic Development Committee.

Local economic development efforts are currently split among various groups. Greater New Orleans Inc., for example, is charged with economic development for the entire 10-parish region. The city's Office of Economic Development, though charged with promoting New Orleans business, has been underfinanced for some time, said Councilwoman Shelly Midura.

"The idea of creating an economic development entity outside of City Hall that has continuity and is run outside the sphere of politics has been something I campaigned for and would really like to see happen." Midura said.

A spokesman for Donna Addkison, chief development officer in Mayor Ray Nagin's Office of Planning and Development, said that Addkison has met with representatives of the Horizon Initiative and supports public-private partnerships like the one being suggested by the group.

The Horizon Initiative started in October 2006, when 150 business and civic leaders gathered to discuss the idea, said George Wentz Jr., a lawyer and cofounder of the group along with businessman Arthur Pulitzer.

Wentz sums up the situation this way: Over the past 20 years, the city has been on the downslide according to measures of education, crime, race relations, jobs and infrastructure. But New Orleans' recovery from Hurricane Katrina has opened up an opportunity to make long-needed changes, he said.

The Horizon Initiative wants to establish itself as a public-private partnership that would study economic development models in other cities before settling on an approach for New Orleans.

The group is already working with the nonprofit Rand Gulf States Policy Institute, created in December 2005 to develop public policy in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Rand set aside \$1 million to finance several projects and to research critical issues affecting the Gulf states, including improving the health care system, building affordable housing, improving public safety agencies, and weighing the costs and benefits of different levels of hurricane protection, flood control



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and wetlands restoration.

In explaining the need for improved economic development, Wentz points to Miami, San Antonio and Charlotte. In 1983 New Orleans was larger than all those cities with better prospects too, he said. Since then, Charlotte has turned itself into a financial center of the South. San Antonio built a thriving tourism industry and threatened to take the city's Saints. Houston has become the nation's fourth-biggest city, and home to thousands of oil industry jobs, many of them relocated from New Orleans.

But it may be the Miami-Dade County area that has experienced the biggest transformation, Wentz said. By the early 1980s, the south Florida city's image was dominated by cocaine smugglers chronicled in the movie "Scarface" and by real-life street riots related to Cuban immigration. Less than 20 years later, Miami has become a sparkling Gateway to Latin America, yanking the title from New Orleans and with it major fresh fruit imports.

Miami's transformation is due at least in part to the fact that it contracted out economic development efforts to a public-private partnership that has acted as the central source and advocate for businesses, Wentz said. The Miami group assists businesses interested in relocating to the Miami area by performing services such as lining up potential sites for them to visit and making information about the area available. The Miami group also stays in touch with the existing business community and works to meet their needs. The Miami partnership has endured through various political administrations, resulting in an enduring plan less impacted by changing political winds, Wentz said. The Horizon Initiative would seek to accomplish much the same thing, he said.

"We can learn a great deal of best practices through experiences in Miami and other cities," Feilkow said, noting he has already visited Pittsburgh to talk with the former mayor and business leaders there.

The biggest job in New Orleans now is retention, of both people and businesses, Wentz said. Quality of life and economic performance of the city are paramount.

"People need hope," Wentz said. "If they don't feel anything is happening, they lose hope."

The Horizon Initiative group has divided itself to work on different sectors to discuss: education, the energy industry, cultural continuity, entertainment, housing and real estate, infrastructure, the port, race relations and the restaurant industry.

The city's Unified New Orleans Plan recommends creating an agency like the Jefferson Parish Economic Development Commission, which is charged with promoting development in Jefferson Parish. Such an entity could combine incentives created in the GO Zone legislation, city's Enterprise Zone and other rebuilding initiatives and figure out how to use them to attract new businesses and support existing businesses, Midura said.

The Horizon Initiative is working to raise \$100,000 to finance the Randy study. The group will hold a fundraiser on May 3 at Tipitina's in the French Quarter.

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