

From the
DIRECTOR

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35 Years of Preservation Blueprint for Urban Revitalization

Thirty-five years of considerable impact surely entitles the Preservation Resource Center to a self-congratulatory look back and an optimistic look forward, as well as to a celebratory new look as we enter our 36th year with ambitious and exciting goals. How fitting that we can show off the historic architecture and neighborhoods of New Orleans more effectively with this new design for Preservation In Print thanks to Brennan's Printing, graphic designer Fonda Brennan, the editorial staff and our loyal advertisers.

Many have said that New Orleans would not have retained its historic character were it not for the work of the PRC. While we are pleased to accept this compliment, we extend these sentiments to include the countless individuals, organizations and agencies at local, state and national levels, both public and private, who have contributed to this difference by reversing neighborhood decline, bringing new life downtown and saving buildings.

A big hoorah is in order for the success of preservation initiatives since the National Preservation Act was passed in 1966. We will not miss opportunities to put this front and forward as we contemplate how much remains to be done to restore cities to their pre-1950 levels of vitality.

President Barack Obama has established the White House Office of Urban Affairs, at the least giving some formal recognition that cities are critical to the vitality and strength of the country. We hope it means even more than this. Rebuilding urban

populations, protecting what remains of the historic built environment and providing sensitive and appropriate new construction in our cities has tremendous economic, cultural, sociological and environmental benefits to the country as a whole.

Impressive preservation programs at the federal, state and local levels have reduced or even reversed the alarming decline and actual destruction of city centers that was rampant in the mid-20th century. Therefore, we respectfully submit the preservation approach as a blueprint for urban revitalization. The programs are worth considering not only for their impact but for the comparative low-budget figures with which all operate.

The PRC was founded in 1974, eight years after the National Preservation Act of 1966. By that time, the act had established the framework for federal programs working through state preservation offices in every state, and local organizations and government agencies were beginning to follow suit, creating local historic districts and organizing a variety of efforts to reverse the negative image of inner-city areas and promote the once-neglected historic built environment as irreplaceable economic and cultural treasures.

Most cities of the nation, however, have not rebounded to their pre-decline levels of vitality and population. Preservation strategies in New Orleans over the past 35 years, while perhaps in the forefront in many ways, can be utilized as a blueprint for carrying urban revitalization further.

1 Support for the creation of local historic districts. In almost every case, local designation stabilizes and provides the confidence for homeowners and business owners to invest. This is because property owners are assured that the investment in their property will not be harmed by inappropriate alterations or construction on adjacent properties. Thereby, a local historic district offers a secure location for investment. Many neighborhoods in New Orleans want to become districts, but the Historic District Landmarks Commission (HDLC) staff levels would have to be increased to accommodate administration of new districts. The cost is minimal when you consider that property values in most local districts across the U.S. tend to rise in historic districts and have declined less in the current economic environment than suburban neighborhoods. This generates added revenue to the city at a cost much less than other economic development measures. (www.cityofno.com/pg-99-1-hdld.aspx)

2 Utilization of tax incentives at the federal level to accomplish revitalization goals. New Orleans has consistently ranked in the top 10 states using the rehab tax credit, resulting in astounding restorations throughout the business district and neighborhoods. For example, tax credits (and historic district designation) has resulted in a virtual recreation of the Warehouse District into a vital residential and entertainment center where the streets were once dark and deserted at night. When you read this issue of Preservation in Print note that impressive projects such as the rehabilitation of the American Chicle Company (now Landis Construction) in Carrollton and the Pontchartrain Hotel in Central City would not be happening without rehab tax credits. Tax incentives involving the built environment, including sensitive new construction, should be considered a major strategy for

accomplishing additional urban revitalization goals. (www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/)

3 Expanded use of the "Main Street" program to accomplish revitalization goals. Created by the National Trust in 1980 and established in Louisiana in 1984, the Main Street program just might be the most successful economic development program ever in leveraging public dollars with private investment. Originally for small town main streets, the program is also utilized by cities for neighborhood commercial areas. New Orleans now has six urban main streets. (www.preservation-nation.org/main-street/)

4 Funding of the "Elm Street" program concept, a companion program to Main Street, with a focus on residential development. The Main Street program has been so successful in Pennsylvania that the state legislature there has funded "Elm Street" for residential development. So far, about half of Pennsylvania's Main Street programs now have Elm Street working on residential revitalization along with the commercial. After all, residents provide the customer and client base that business investment requires. In Louisiana, the legislature has passed "Magnolia Street" legislation, but no funding has been provided. (www.padowntown.org/programs/elmstreet/)

If urban revitalization is a goal, these highly successful programs should receive federal, state and local support. Certainly new programs can be devised, but if this less costly blueprint is utilized, everyone will be amazed how other urban problems, such as crime, poor schools and infrastructure will be much easier to address. And wouldn't we all be thrilled, no matter where we live or visit, to see thriving downtowns and lively neighborhoods everywhere. Let's take these programs to another level.