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New Orleans Proposes to Invest in 17 Areas

By [ADAM NOSSITER](#)

NEW ORLEANS, March 29 — New Orleans unveiled its latest redevelopment plan Thursday, choosing 17 zones where the city has decided to concentrate resources in order to stimulate investment and renewal.

The 17 development zones, each about a half-mile in diameter, are scattered throughout New Orleans. They vary from a devastated shopping plaza in the eastern section of the city, to blocks in the ruined Lower Ninth Ward and to areas not hard-hit by Hurricane Katrina but still in need of renewal, as officials put it, including the old St. Roch Market in the Bywater area.

The plan is at least the fourth such effort since the storm, and at about \$1.1 billion, notably more modest than its predecessors.

Its modesty provided some hope that, unlike the other plans that have been shelved or are in limbo, the outline presented at City Hall by Mayor C. Ray Nagin and his recovery chief, Edward J. Blakely, may come to fruition in some form.

Indeed, Mr. Blakely, an academic and a recognized expert in disaster recovery, promised “cranes on the skyline” by September. But where exactly they will be, and what they will be doing, was unclear from Thursday’s summary presentation.

While the city that tourists know has regained much of its old life, many other areas that were blighted long before the storm or that have become lifeless since, have yet to come back.

The hope is that if these 17 limited areas are redeveloped, they will become catalysts for further development around them.

Under the plan, some of the public investment will be used as loans and unspecified “other incentives” to private developers, and some will be used for the development of public works like libraries and clinics.

A common historical thread is that the designated areas are “all centered on the old markets, on which the city was built in the first place,” Mr. Blakely said, referring to public market buildings like the St. Roch, that once were neighborhood hubs.

The bulk of the money will be used on citywide projects like park improvements and traffic lights.

Development in the 17 areas will be “driven by incentives and a market-driven approach,” Mr. Nagin said at a City Hall news conference. He has long maintained that the economic market will guide New Orleans’s recovery, a process that has been playing out in the 19 months since the hurricane, though not necessarily to the city’s advantage. Developers, for instance, have been fearful of making large-scale commitments in the absence of an authoritative plan, and former residents who lack resources to re-establish themselves have yet to return.

Finger-pointing, bitterness and unrealistic expectations have helped to dissolve previous planning exercises that have emanated in a flurry since the hurricane. One recent proposal called for spending \$14 billion on a grab-bag of ideas, with no parts of the city, no matter how vulnerable or dangerous, excluded.

This latest concept, with its narrow geographical focus and limited budget, struck some planners as more realistic.

“It’s promising to see somebody who is giving us a program that’s based on a realistic assessment of potential resources,” said Janet Howard, president of the Bureau of Governmental Research, a nonprofit public-policy organization here.

Still, the money is not a sure thing. The biggest chunk, \$324 million, depends on Congress’s agreeing to waive Louisiana’s share of federally financed disaster recovery projects. President Bush is against forgiving this 10 percent match, which is mandated under the law, but the idea of a waiver — as was provided to New York after the Sept. 11 attacks and to Florida after Hurricane Andrew — has strong support in Congress.

Another \$260 million would come from bonds already approved by voters, and \$300 million more would come from a new bond sale based on selling the city’s blighted-property holdings to developers.

“I expect by the end of the summer you’re going to see a lot of activity,” Mr. Nagin said Thursday — a promise citizens here have heard before.

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