



Everything New Orleans

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EDITORIAL: A season for substance

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Louisiana voters who are facing the first post-storm cycle of statewide elections have a right to expect candidates to express their vision for this state's future during recovery and beyond.

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Candidates who are elected to office this fall will inherit a recovery that's still in its early stages. But they're likely to find the revenue boom from rebuilding efforts to be short-lived -- it certainly won't last forever.

What won't vanish, however, are the fiscal consequences of the spending spree that Gov. Kathleen Blanco and the Legislature went on last spring. In fact, the full impact of increased spending and borrowing and phased-in tax cuts won't be fully felt until 2008 and later.

That means people seeking office today will have to deal with what's been described as a fiscal time bomb. Would-be leaders and lawmakers need to address that potential crisis and explain their spending priorities.

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana is urging voters to ask candidates substantive questions as they consider who will be the next governor and who will represent them in the Legislature. That is worthwhile advice at any time, but especially now.

Louisiana has an opportunity to emerge from the twin disasters of Katrina and Rita as a better state. We can improve education and access to healthcare, giving people a better chance to lead healthy, productive lives. We can become a place that attracts new businesses and industry, that no longer loses its educated young people to other states but instead lures productive residents from elsewhere.

But none of that will happen unless Louisianians choose leaders who have vision. Candidates should be able to explain their plans for economic development, education and health care reform. They should be able to describe the Louisiana of the future and explain what we need to do to arrive there.

For New Orleans area voters, it's also critical to determine where candidates stand on the state's role in the recovery of this flood-ravaged region. Officials from other parts of Louisiana have sometimes viewed the disaster that befell this city as an opportunity to gather spoils. There were failed attempts to move the state Supreme Court and the Louisiana State University medical school to Baton Rouge, for example.

But disinvesting in New Orleans would be a destructive move for the city and the entire state. This region is critically important -- from oil and gas, to the port and the tourism industry. That's still true, even after Katrina, and candidates must show that they grasp the economic, social and cultural importance of this area.

Our next crop of leaders must understand that recovery is vital and that the state's role is substantial and ongoing, whether that means sending National Guard troops here to help patrol the streets, taking over failing schools through the Recovery School District or making a commitment to build a new teaching hospital here.

While Gov. Blanco and the Legislature made some poor choices -- using the recovery windfall to create 1,200 new state jobs, hand out raises and fund pork barrel projects -- they made some good decisions, too. When the Road Home program came up short, the Legislature allocated \$1 billion to help meet the deficit. And lawmakers budgeted \$200 million for coastal restoration, another crisis for this state, and one that we only have about 10 years to address.

PAR describes coastal erosion as one of the "big-ticket" items facing Louisiana along with rebuilding costs from Katrina and Rita, our aging and inadequate transportation network and the crushing load of debt retirement. That's a daunting mountain of need, and voters should be asking candidates how they plan to meet it.

In the next six weeks, would-be governors, lieutenant governors, lawmakers and other office-seekers will be gladhanding voters and passing out push cards. They'll be touting their qualifications and platforms to anyone who'll listen.

But candidates also must answer tough questions, not with platitudes but with plans. Louisianians understand how important these next four years are. They want and deserve leaders who understand that, too.