



A blueprint for the future

MOVING THE BALL: Rudy Gomez says Blueprint Louisiana 'had a great first year.'

By [David Jacobs \(Contact\)](#)

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Blueprint Louisiana was on the road again last month, touting its successes in a hotel conference room filled with about 100 civic leaders, businesspeople and activists.

"We had a great first year," said Rudy Gomez of Blueprint project manager SSA Consultants.

Blueprint visited every region of the state to receive input for the group's next batch of possible proposals, while claiming partial credit for recent reforms in ethics, education, economic development and health care.

How much impact Blueprint actually had is hard to measure. Gov. Bobby Jindal pushed many of the same items independent of Blueprint, and other groups have been working on those issues for years.

"The thing that really makes Blueprint unique is this idea of finding the short list of priorities and trying to get it done," Gomez says.

Blueprint has about 3,000 members and is backed by prominent business leaders throughout the state. The organization doesn't create new ideas; instead, Blueprint gathers input from policy experts, government leaders, Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, Public Affairs Research Council, Council for a Better Louisiana and others, and those ideas are discussed and ranked in public workshops.

The first Blueprint agenda was released July 30, 2007, and every statewide and legislative candidate was asked to sign on. Other good-government nonprofits like PAR and CABL can't legally endorse candidates. Once the dust of the 2007 elections had settled, 32 of 37 senators and 74 of 105 representatives were official Blueprint supporters; Jindal, however, was not. Organizers reported legislative success or partial success on more than a dozen agenda items.

“We keep talking about the same problems. Rarely do we move the ball on any of them,” Gomez says. “Things that got done, not all of them would have gotten done without our help, or would not have gotten done as cleanly.”

Most of Blueprint’s spending, about \$4 million so far, comes from its nearly 60 trustees. Two firms, Haynie & Associates and Harris DeVille & Associates, handle government relations and communications. Six additional lobbyists were hired for the 2008 legislative cycle, although one prominent Capitol watcher says the lobbyists didn’t have to work that hard because the bills were sailing along.

“Maybe we didn’t do all the lifting, but certainly the groundwork was laid,” says Sean Reilly, former Democratic lawmaker, president of Lamar Advertising’s outdoor division and Blueprint’s current chairman.

While the ethics reforms Blueprint supported were much like those pushed by Jindal and others, Reilly cites expansion of the LA4 preschool program and dual enrollment programs for high school students as issues where Blueprint took the lead.

“If you sign the contract and vote the other way, certainly we will make it known,” Reilly says, although no one has defected yet. “When we released the agenda, many candidates just adopted it and campaigned on it. Quite literally, it was part of their stump speech.”

State Rep. Steve Carter, a Baton Rouge Republican elected in 2007, says supporting the Blueprint agenda was “a no-brainer,” although he doesn’t see a big distinction between Blueprint and other reform groups. He says when the new legislators met for the first time, it seemed most who didn’t sign on with Blueprint were concerned about their health care ideas.

“The state, with Jindal, was in a mode to do what these people were saying to do,” Carter says. “I think by them echoing it, and by Gov. Jindal pushing it, it made it a lot easier for everything to pass.”

Demographer and political consultant Elliott Stonecipher says more than 82% of Louisiana’s population is native-born, and there are very few people at the income level of the key supporters of Blueprint, PAR, CABL, LABI and other such groups. The board members tend to be a lot of the same people, they tend to think alike, and what emerges is a generally pro-business viewpoint. Even though Jindal didn’t sign the contract, it’s hard to find much difference between his views and Blueprint’s, Stonecipher says.

“Somehow or another, they all get together, and they all go out and sing the same chorus,” he says. “In many states, there is far more debate, far more divergence, far more bubbling up of ideas and far more opposition to whatever the establishment position is. We don’t see that here.”

Stonecipher says Blueprint spent a relatively small amount of money during the election cycle, and he hasn't seen any polling data showing Blueprint made a difference or heard many legislators give Blueprint credit for their victories. Most voters don't even know about groups like Blueprint, although the elites who effectively select the candidates certainly do.

"The more people you have pushing the wagon, the better off you are," says Barry Erwin of CABL. In politics, windows of opportunity open and close, and he says the first year after an election tends to be the best time to pass reforms. After the 2005 hurricanes, there was a lot of talk about rebuilding Louisiana better than before, and a lot of old issues got traction with a young governor and new legislators looking for an agenda they could support.

Jim Brandt of PAR says ethics reform probably would have passed regardless, but Blueprint was a leader on LA4, dedicated funding for transportation and greater transparency in health care funding. He says it's hard to say how much influence Blueprint had on the elections.

"I suspect it will take more than one election cycle to build that brand-name identity they are working toward," he says.

The real test of Blueprint's clout might be health care. Ethics reform was cheap and relatively uncontroversial. But there is no consensus on how to fix Louisiana's dismal health care situation, and any viable solution will involve billions of dollars and risk angering stakeholders in the current system.

Meanwhile, details of many recent changes still must be worked out. Senate Bill 286 theoretically guarantees access to the LA4 pre-kindergarten program to every Louisiana child by 2013, but the funding is in question. Many observers argue ethics reform has been gutted with enforcement loopholes.

Attendees at the most recent round of Blueprint meetings selected two top priorities: creating a funding model for higher education based on performance measures like graduation rates rather than enrollment, and school board reform including term limits and mandatory training for board members by the Department of Education. Reilly expects two or three new Blueprint proposals will be ready before the next regular session.