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Katrina Aftermath: Our Ongoing Optimism and Generosity

by Senator Norm Coleman

The destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina in and around New Orleans is an unprecedented human tragedy, but at the same time, the outpouring of generosity and desire to help on the part of Minnesotans and all Americans has been overwhelming. Katrina has shattered our cities and coast, but it has not diminished our spirit. What is needed now, more than ever, is hope. The President, Congress, and the American people have responded and the message is loud and clear: We will do whatever it takes to rebuild the region. And, it will emerge even stronger than ever.

As personal stories and pictures of loss continued to come in days after the storm, I was moved by the many Minnesotans who have helped lead the way in meeting the needs of the communities and families whose lives have been shattered by this national natural disaster. Twin Cities radio stations joined together on the Washington Street Bridge at the University of Minnesota to hold a “River of Relief” fundraiser to raise thousands of dollars in aid for our fellow citizens hurting at the other end of the Mississippi river in New Orleans. State officials quickly made sure that Camp Ripley was ready and equipped to not just accommodate up to 3,000 evacuees, but make them feel at home. From one end of the state to the other, Minnesotans reached out to do their part, groups and individuals like Hope for the City, the Minnesota Coalition to aid Hurricane Katrina survivors, dozens of churches, health care professionals, and volunteers, including some musicians who contributed the drums so the New Orleans ReBirth Brass Band could play a gig as scheduled in Minneapolis. Many families opened their homes to those who lost everything, and the City of Bird Island made a former convent available as a temporary home for up to 80 evacuees.

Although the flood waters have begun to recede from the City of New Orleans, the displaced residents of Katrina still need the basic necessities such as food, water, clothing, and health care.

To this end, Congress has provided more than \$60 billion in emergency Federal funding to carry out the first stages of the relief effort and to start the rebuilding. Government on all levels continues to respond to deliver benefits and services quickly and efficiently. Rest assured: no matter the race, age, or class, all will be given the necessary resources needed to recover from the ruinous impact of the storm.

Progress has been made, but there still remains more to do. Rebuilding and revitalizing New Orleans and affected towns in Mississippi is going to require massive reinvestment, an effort that begins with strong leadership and an optimistic vision for its future and future of our nation.

I have stated before that I believe we can achieve a world class rebirth of New Orleans and other affected areas. Tragedy can be transformed into triumph, and we can use this historic opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of the people impacted by Katrina. Of course, transportation and infrastructure need to be rebuilt in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, but at the same time, we can strengthen the educational system in the region to become cutting edge and competitive. And, as we start from scratch in our rebuilding efforts, we must take care to build up the area’s intellectual and technological infrastructure at the same time we rebuild the region’s physical infrastructure.

We must also look at ideas such as tax credits to encourage recovery and restoration by businesses and corporations in the region, creating federal matching grant program with math and science graduate schools; targeting of job training and other workforce development funds and strategies to victims of the hurricane, and passage of massive infrastructure “bonding bill” for projects in affected areas, targeting physical, intellectual and technological infrastructure. Economic growth and job-creation can be sustained for the long term as we plan a future that is stronger and brighter for the region.

During his address to the nation, the President brought forth a plan to address the rebuilding efforts in both the short and long terms, and I have pledged to work with him and his administration to develop great revitalization efforts such as worker recovery accounts that allow for education, child care, and workforce training, and urban homesteading. The creation of a Gulf Opportunity Zone, or GO Zone, will also help local economics and businesses in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama get back on their feet by providing tax relief and loans for businesses to invest in the region and create jobs.

Initially, I was disappointed that no leadership position was established to oversee and implement the rebuilding effort in the region. On that note, I was pleased to support legislation that passed the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee creating a Chief Financial Officer to ensure that Federal funds are spent responsibly and effectively. We must not let waste become a barrier to rebuilding New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast.

With that in mind, planning for the rebuilding of New Orleans should involve experts in city planning and renewal from the academic and local government sector, and I will work with my colleagues Senators Vitter and Landrieu to envision a future that is long-term and vibrant for New Orleans. As a former mayor, I understand how important it is to retain the culture and open spaces of the devastated areas, while employing sound city planning and renewal practices. Our efforts should be rooted in four principles:

1. Bringing together the best practices of current environmental science to deal with water, toxicity and flooding issues in a permanently sustainable manner;
2. Dealing with social problems, both of the relocation and those which existed before Katrina to revitalize the sense of community and common purpose in the region;
3. Maximizing the cultural and historical strengths that have made New Orleans one of the great American cities; and
4. Connecting all of these elements in a comprehensive urban re-design for the area that makes the rebuilt New Orleans a model to the United States and rest of the world of what intelligent and imaginative urban planning can accomplish.

We have all heard the statement that every crisis is an opportunity in disguise. For those who have lost their lives, their loved ones, their homes and everything, this tragedy wears no mask, and we need to confront the painful reality of what has happened to them. But for the rest of us, Hurricane Katrina is an opportunity to learn lessons that may spare another community a similar fate.

I have also heard a tremendous outcry to recognize the problems we had responding the tragedy and have been asked to seek possible remedies. While the government fumbled in its emergency response during the immediate aftermath of the hurricane's destruction, we are taking the appropriate measures to find out what went wrong, where it went wrong, and how we can correct it. While some are calling for an independent commission to investigate what happened, Congress needs to be at the helm so we can see first hand what worked, what didn't and then make changes in the law accordingly. Congress has a long tradition of undertaking serious investigations on its own including Watergate, Iran Contra, and Campaign Finance and this is not a time to be outsourcing our oversight responsibilities.

In the meantime, we must continue to pick up the pieces left scattered by Hurricane Katrina and work toward a recovery of the region that is visionary and hopeful. The Hurricane was brutally effective at destruction; we need to be extraordinarily effective at the reconstruction of infrastructure, communities, and the lives of people. Katrina did its damage, but I can assure you that New Orleans will come back bigger, better and stronger than it was prior to the disaster.

I thank those of you who have already given so generously, and I continue to urge all Minnesotans to do what you can, whether it be through prayer, donations, or volunteering in the recovery efforts. You can make a difference. For more information, please visit my Web site, www.coleman.senate.gov to find out how you can contribute.