



By Yvahn Martin

## A New Orleans for the Future

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[Last week](#), I set out to [BeNOLABound](#) with a skeptic's eye, with no knowledge of what would take place other than that I along with 26 other professionals would be brought around to meet with local business leaders and learn what New Orleans has been up to since I left. We had no idea who exactly we'd be meeting with, what our schedules would be, or if it would be a colossal waste of time full of Mardi Gras beads and marketing-speak. We took a chance, and were completely blown away by what many of us now describe as a life-changing experience.

The City of New Orleans is poised for a comeback like I never believed possible. She has hung out an "Open for Business" shingle and has gotten to work, shaking hands and beating the street, determined to win back businesses and residents alike. Building on the success of the film and television tax incentive programs (New Orleans is poised to pass New York City as a center of film production next year), new incentive programs have been created for digital production and technology, bioscience innovation, and green/sustainable industry. And so far, they seem to be working. Both GE Capital and Google have plans to build offices here in the city, and locally-bred companies such as [iSeatz](#), [TurboSquid](#), [Search Influence](#) and [Receivables Exchange](#) are emerging as formidable -- and currently hiring -- technology players. There is a new [Bioinnovation](#) center housing incredible startups like [Theodent](#), a new toothpaste derived from chocolate. And the startup scene at-large is more vibrant than ever before, with IdeaVillage hosting its biggest N.O. Entrepreneur Week gathering yet with [The Big Idea](#). Never in my life have I seen such excitement and enthusiasm in New Orleans about anything except partying. But there is an emerging coalition of competent leaders who are passionate about pushing New Orleans forward, and largely succeeding.

Were there potentially troublesome moments in the process? Yes. In a city that is now still about 60 percent black, several of us expressed frustration that there wasn't more representation from black leaders and entrepreneurs in the whirlwind weekend programming. But that's not to say there were none - notables like Rodrick Miller of [New Orleans Business Alliance](#), Chris Boudy of [New Orleans Tech](#), and entrepreneur-activist Wendell Pierce were all on hand to share their time and experiences. Additionally, throughout the programming, several BeNOLABounders reminded us that technology economies often create plenty of jobs for skilled, educated labor, but leaves unskilled labor behind and increases the wealth divide. Luckily, [GNOInc](#) is also working to attract companies to utilize advanced manufacturing infrastructure already in the state, and the \$2 Billion LSU/VA Hospital project is expected to create 25,000 jobs at a variety of skill levels.

Even more remarkable was the firm commitment to social justice and responsible entrepreneurship exhibited by business leaders such as [Allen Eskew](#) and [Robbie Vitrano](#). Never before in my lifetime in New Orleans have I heard such public figures addressing difficult issues like racism and economic inequality in a casual, non-"crisis mode" way that affirms their commitment to rebuilding New Orleans for everyone.

Competent, communicative leaders are popping up all over the place in New Orleans, all echoing new mantras of measurement, analysis and community accountability. The [NOPD](#) is investing in both new technology and new people - specifically in implementing the [CeaseFire](#) program -- to help interrupt the violence that has plagued the city for decades. In spite of the surrounding controversy, [New Schools for New Orleans](#) is doing remarkable and groundbreaking work in terms of prioritizing the students' success and making teachers and administrators accountable for achieving progress. Is there still work to be done? Of course, and no process is without complications or mistakes, much less the rebuilding of a centuries-old city with as colorful a history as New Orleans. Six years into the process, I can honestly say that I believe New Orleans is on the right track for a successful recovery... if the earnest enthusiasm that I saw in the community this week was not just a play for the cameras.

"Native New Orleanians who left after Katrina are often our most difficult converts." ~ Tim Williamson, Idea Village

One of the biggest "selling points" that we heard this week was that the culture of New Orleans is the biggest draw to the city, the quality of life, the caring and passionate people that make up the community. While I can wholeheartedly agree that New Orleans is one of the most special places on earth, I think I speak for most native New Orleanians when I say that we hold that culture within ourselves, so when we found better job opportunities or schools elsewhere after Katrina, the desire to return lost out to more practical impulses. However, I think that loss of interest was due to an expectation that New Orleans post-Katrina would go back to "business as usual" -- corrupt, apathetic, bloated-bureaucracy, lacking progress and innovation, maintaining an ever-declining status quo. But that has changed. New Orleans knows that it must not only survive but thrive to remain viable for the next 50 to 100 years.

The real test of time, for both those pioneers that are doing the heavy lifting of rebuilding the city -- God bless them -- and those waiting in the wings to see sparks of change, will be if New Orleans can continue this exciting momentum for the next 5 to 10 years, when Katrina is farther away in the city's rearview mirror and the temptation to relax is upon us. For a city that is celebrating its tricentennial of European settlement in just a few years, it is important to remember that the rebuilding process has only just begun, and it will take many more players willing to take a chance on New Orleans and invest themselves in shaping its future. But it is also important to remember that Native Americans began trading at this little crook of high ground in the mouth of the Mississippi river over 2,000 years ago. New Orleans will always be integral to the business and cultural fabric of America. It is up to us to determine what impact New Orleans can have in the 21st century.

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