

NEXUS PLANNING

New Orleans & Regional Planning Concept Paper

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The recovery and long-range redevelopment of New Orleans is a complex undertaking requiring simultaneous planning in a wide range of disciplines. For the most part, these disciplines have been articulated through the sub-committees of both the Louisiana Recovery Authority and the Bring New Orleans Back Commission. Together, these sub-committee plans address vision and conceptual frameworks for the physical, cultural, social, educational, organizational and economic components of the state, regional and local asset and needs infrastructure. What is needed now is a mechanism for moving these independent visioning and concept plans forward to create a coordinated set of action plans for implementation. Paramount in this effort will be the development of a comprehensive strategy for development and implementation.

SYSTEMIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK

A planning framework that can be developed to support this comprehensive strategy is a public/private planning process that can be implemented through the combined efforts of the Louisiana Recovery Authority and the New Orleans Community Support Foundation (NOCSF). One advantage of this joint effort is that all components of government and civic participation are represented and have already bought into moving forward through a collaborative process. To date, however, the primary focus of both statewide and New Orleans planning initiatives has been on urban planning for the physical and economic components of redevelopment. The opportunity exists to expand this planning process to encompass the full range of cultural, social, educational and organizational recommendations as articulated by the LRA and BNOB task forces and committees. The result can be a higher levels of efficiency in programming the full range of facilities and programs needed to support the complete quality of life needs for individuals and communities throughout the state.

Organizational Structure

In order to simplify the integrative planning process it is important to reduce any duplication in the LRA and BNOB planning processes moving forward. This can be accomplished through a simple reorganization of the sub-committee reports and recommendations from each of these two entities into six common elements to form an integrated nexus planning framework:

- 1) **Physical**: Representing all urban design, facilities planning and telecommunications system infrastructure. (Urban Planning; Infrastructure and Telecommunications sub-committee reports).
- 2) **Cultural**: Representing all Visual, Performing, Culinary and other arts disciplines as well as ethnic and faith based initiatives. (Cultural sub-committee report).
- 3) **Social**: Representing all Health, Housing and Human Service programs. (Health and Social Services sub-committee report).
- 4) **Economic**: Representing all financial, environmental and Human resource sustaining resources and programs. (Economic Development sub-committee report).
- 5) **Organizational**: Representing all Governmental reorganization and other leadership issues. (Government Effectiveness sub-committee report).
- 6) **Educational**: Representing lifelong learning programs from pre-kindergarten to work force training. (Education sub-committee report).

Following is a concept diagram of the nexus planning framework:



While it is important to recognize the importance of each of the six elements individually, the focus of the integrated planning model is on the interface or “nexus” where these disciplines overlap and support each other. For example, both the City of New Orleans and the School District (both the Louisiana Recovery District and the Orleans Parish School District) are responsible for recreational (and physical educational) programming. Through nexus based planning the same public recreational spaces can serve both youth and adult recreational programs at different times of the day. The same can be said for libraries, where school libraries and public libraries can be co-located on the same site and in the same building to create a system of distributed “community information centers” that are accessible to all citizens at the neighborhood level. School auditoriums can likewise double as community performing arts centers and school gymnasiums can be used for community athletics at night and on weekends. In this way, a more robust system of broad based community programming can be achieved at a reduction in total capital and operational costs.

BNOB/NEXUS /LRA ALIGNMENT

The Nexus planning framework provides an integrated structure through which to align and coordinate the work of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission committees and sub-committees with the various committees, task forces and funding streams of the Louisiana Recovery Authority.

BNOB COMMITTEES

NEXUS FRAMEWORK

LRA COMMITTEES

Urban Design
Subcommittee

PHYSICAL

Coastal protection Task Force

Environmental Task Force

Infrastructure
Subcommittee

Infrastructure &
transportation
Task Force

Land Use Subcommittee

Cultural Committee

CULTURAL

(Refer to Report from the
Department of Culture,
Recreation and Tourism)

Historic Preservation
Sub Committee

Health and Social Services
Committee

SOCIAL

Public health Task Force

Housing Task Force

Human services Task Force

Economic Development
Committee

ECONOMIC

Economic Development and
Workforce Training

Audit Subcommittee

Government Effectiveness
Committee

ORGANIZATIONAL

Long term Community
Planning Task Force

Federal Legislative
Task Force

State and Local Legislative
Task Force

Education Committee

EDUCATIONAL

Education Task Force

COMMUNITY NEXUS CENTERS

The following Community Nexus Centers concept is based on previous work with the Louisiana Recovery Authority, Mayor Ray Nagin, the New Orleans Public School Board and the State of Louisiana Department of Education, and with confirmation from the various New Orleans planning initiatives outlined above.

Community Programs and Services

Every citizen is entitled to a wide array of community programs and services that are provided through public funding and delivered through multiple public agencies. These include programs and services that support educational, health, social, cultural, transportation, recreation, safety and other individual needs. The degree to which these services are effective is determined largely by how accessible they are to the people who need them. To a large degree the complex network of agencies and providers established to deliver these public services has proven to be both inefficient and cumbersome. With respect to low-income communities, where the barriers to access are at their highest, the need for physical proximity and information access to public programs is critical.

One of the reasons why the delivery of public programs is less than adequate is because they are usually disaggregated. For example, programs for pre-kindergarten and early childhood education are managed separately from educational programs at the elementary, middle and high school grade levels. Similarly, programs for community college are usually administered through yet another independent agency, usually at a different site, which is also the case with vocational and higher education. Programs for adult literacy fall into a different category, which are usually offered at yet another location. For the underserved population of workers whose livelihood depends on multiple jobs, or whose technology or literacy may be challenged, or for those who have income levels too low to support access to private transportation, access to these programs and services can be severely limited. The illustration above holds true for most categories of public services, where access to programs and resources is widely dispersed and administratively complicated. It is for this reason that a new strategy for the distribution of public services at the neighborhood level can provide for a more equitable and effective means of program delivery.

In most cases where the disaggregated condition exists, the barriers to change are formidable. Longstanding commitments to existing physical infrastructure and administrative alliances are often among the more prominent of these obstacles. However, in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, these barriers have been significantly reduced by the need to rebuild at a previously unprecedented scale and within an accelerated timeframe. In the rebuilding process, close attention must be paid to how a wide spectrum of community programs and services can be provided more effectively.

Access, Access, Access

The goal for the rebuilding of south Louisiana including New Orleans can include a Community Nexus Center for every small town and neighborhood. These centers can be centrally located within walking distance of all neighborhood residents. Where possible, the Community Nexus Center should be sited along public transportation routes and light rail corridors.

Precedents

Examples exist of community plans that promote the consolidation of facilities and services. In fact, the design of neighborhood centers has long been a component of the urban planning lexicon. However, for the most part, neighborhood planning has often focused on co-location of

facilities that provide only the physical infrastructure to support the larger programmatic and social goals of a more systemic approach to neighborhood planning. One model that transcends these limits of physical planning, however, is the community school.

Historically, schools have been a community gathering point. At one time, the school building, often the grandest building in the neighborhood, offered a place for residents to come together. Community schools have traditionally provided services that go well beyond traditional schooling. In addition to classrooms, the community school facility might also house after school programs; medical and mental health clinics; libraries and recreation centers; classes for adult education; workforce training and job counseling; early childhood programs; community meeting centers; and arts and cultural opportunities. Space for these services are usually constructed as an integral part of the school facility at far less cost than if the schools were designed for use only from 8 to 3, nine months out of the year, or if libraries, recreation centers and health facilities were built as free standing places.

This kind of model has been tested in dozens of communities in every state with great success—bringing back the true community spirit of education while providing the most effective use of taxpayer funds. Research by the Coalition for Community Schools shows that student learning and development improve, particularly for students living in poverty, because community schools have resources to address the physical, social and emotional needs of their students.¹ The majority of the 20 schools examined in a 2003 study showed improvement in attendance and discipline, better access to physical and mental health services, and more participation by students' families in the schools. Anecdotal evidence shows that such schools may also reduce crime by offering students activities after school and by making neighborhoods more active in evening hours. Successes such as these have helped convince diverse cities such as Chicago, Portland, Oregon, Lincoln, Nebraska and Baltimore, to make community schools a centerpiece of their school improvement and urban revitalization efforts.

Why is it called a Nexus?

In most dialogue around urban design and neighborhood planning, the focus has been on the development of neighborhood “hub” or “center” models where the emphasis is placed on geographic centrality in lieu of programmatic distribution. The term “nexus” implies and advocates for a programmatic, management and physical design model that is more highly integrated and dynamic in its execution. The goal of the Community Nexus Center concept is to move deliberately towards the integration of all components of community planning into a more systemic whole. Instead of focusing, for example, on the confluence of physical and educational, or physical and health planning as independent goals, the Community Nexus Center advocates for incorporating and integrating the full spectrum of 1-Physical; 2-Cultural, 3-Social, 4-Economic, 5-Organizational, and 6-Educational programming and planning into a more highly coordinated and systemic organizational framework. A fully developed Community Nexus Center is conceived of as a place where a full complement of community programs and services are efficiently located, coordinated and administered in a way that best addresses the needs of the people who will use them. At the core of the concept is a cooperative governance model called the Community Trust.

Community Trust

Community governance is typically divided among a collection of elected and appointed bodies, each operating independently and each responsible for the delivery of a wide range of community services. The local school district, for example, provides educational services from Kindergarten until twelfth grade, then, a community college board takes over, only to pass the mantle on two years later to the state university system. Each entity plans, funds, builds and maintains its own facilities and administrative infrastructure. Likewise, the mayor and city council assume responsibility for building and maintaining community assets like transportation systems, parks and public facilities to support everything from libraries to community health, police and fire protection. County, Parish and State governing bodies often duplicate many of these services at a

larger scale. In addition, hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) add many additional programs and facilities to the mix.

In order to improve efficiency and quality of service to all citizens, the Community Nexus Center model proposes the development of a collaborative governance entity called a Community Trust, to be composed of representatives from a full range of public and not-for-profit entities with the responsibility for coordinating and improving the delivery of all community programs and services.

Form Follows Function

The programming and design of facilities to accommodate a full range of programs and services as proposed for the Community Nexus Center concept must be assembled as a part of a common and collective whole. Included in each nexus should be spaces designed to serve the full spectrum of both individual and community needs and functions. Following is a list of possible components of a Community Nexus Center site.

- Public Open Space is one of the principle components of the community nexus model. It is here that health and recreational activities like soccer, frisbee, touch football and a wide range of other sporting activities can be performed. Likewise, a public park or commons can serve some of the community's needs for cultural programming, through a small amphitheater or other venues for musical performances, weekend festivals, open-air food and flea markets and other outdoor or semi-enclosed cultural activities. The public park is also the place where individuals can find some personal respite - on a bench or on a blanket in a quiet grove of trees. The park should also include semi-public places for picnics and other small group or family activities.

- A Fitness Center can include a full size gymnasium, exercise rooms, fitness equipment and locker rooms to serve the needs of students during school hours and the needs of the larger community during other times.

- A Performing Arts Center can include a performance stage, lighting and back-of-house support spaces to serve the needs of students during school hours and the needs of the larger community during other times.

- A Pre-Kindergarten Learning Center can double as an early learning and a childcare facility.

- A K-8 Learning Center located at the community nexus site can provide all parents with the opportunity to play a more active role in their children's education.

- A High School Learning Center located at the community nexus site can create access not only for high school students, but for all community residents interested in programs for personal enrichment and lifelong learning.

- An Information and Media Center can include a public library, an electronic communications center and other centralized services to serve both educational and recreational needs of neighborhood residents.

- A Career and Technical Learning Center located at the community nexus site can provide opportunities for integrated project-based learning as well as adult education in building and other trades.

- An Adult Learning Center can provide all citizens with an opportunity to improve their education or parenting skills.

- A Food Market with convenient access to the community nexus center can encourage parents and other citizens to participate in education for themselves and their families along with other

aspects of community life. The food market can also participate directly as a mentor in providing for educational access and services.

- A Market Pavilion is another good place for the community to congregate and get to know each other better. Healthy food and conversation are always helpful in bringing people together in a pleasant and productive way.

- A General Store, or Drug Store with ample parking provides another reason for residents to come together at the community nexus center.

- A Community Health Center can provide a convenient way for children to get regular medical attention and for others in the community, especially seniors, to find easy access to flu shots and other simple medical procedures.

- An Emergency Refuge Center can be incorporated into the nexus center site and provide ample supplies of fresh water and on-site energy and other services in the event of a natural disaster or breach in homeland security.

- A Disaster Recovery Center can be stocked with food, health needs and other necessities to support a large part of the neighborhood residents in the event of a hurricane or other significant event.

- A Social Services Center can provide walkable access for all citizens to gain access to adequate programs for health and human services.

- A Senior Center can provide fellowship and recreational programs for the elderly. Located in close proximity to schools, these centers can also become a central focus for mentoring and other productive activities with school aged children.

- A Central Culinary Catering Kitchen can provide food service for all schools on the nexus center site as well as for community events and private parties.

- A Community Garden can serve as an important community gathering space and provide for fresh fruits and vegetables through the help of community volunteers or senior citizens.

- A Recycling Center can provide easy access for educational programs and pick up for glass, paper and plastic products.

- Shops and Restaurants of many sizes located in close proximity to the nexus site can help to create lively and extended-day activities to promote communication and safety for all residents.

- A Transit Station near the nexus center site can enhance access to the site from other parts of the city and provide for central and convenient access to transportation options for all citizens.

Sustainable Design

The scale of renovation and rebuilding needed in the southern region of Louisiana, and especially in New Orleans, provides an opportunity to plan and design environmentally appropriate and sustainable facilities for all of the facilities constructed at the Community Nexus Center sites. Included in the designs may be geothermal heating and cooling systems, rainwater harvesting, photovoltaic electricity, solar hot water and other economical energy management innovations. These systems can be especially useful in the event of future hurricanes when fresh water and electrical power become important factors in promoting human comfort and safety. The buildings can also be designed with ecologically sustainable building materials. Site work can be developed using low impact drainage and native planting. The design of the new Community Nexus Centers in New Orleans can represent the state of the art in sustainable technology.

Technology

The development of Community Nexus Centers provides an opportunity for all citizens of New Orleans to have access to state of the art information technology. Through the development of information and media centers and technology training within walking distance of all neighborhood residents, the information divide can be significantly reduced or someday eliminated.

Learning Community

Although it has become common to think of education as the resource of an independent educational system, current research points to a more compelling opportunity to infuse and integrate learning into the planning and design of the Community Nexus Center as a whole. Some of this research even includes new discoveries in brain research. One example developed by Dr. Howard Gardner at Harvard University's Project Zero emphasizes the strong connection that learning has with emotion, individuality and community. Through his research, Dr. Gardner has identified eight different "intelligences" that help to define how individual learners receive and processes information. These intelligences are: Verbal/Linguistic; Mathematical/Logical; Visual/Spatial; Kinesthetic; Musical; Interpersonal; Intrapersonal and Naturalistic.ⁱⁱ Perhaps the most important outcome of Dr. Gardner's work has been to challenge the previously held practice that focused educational delivery systems almost exclusively on verbal/linguistic and mathematical/logical learning. These new ideas imply that more equitable environments, both pedagogical and physical, would include tools to support a more complete range of learning modalities. Dr. Gardner has postulated, for example, that for some learners, a museum environment might be the most appropriate architectural solution.ⁱⁱⁱ

But although educational theorists and practitioners have been actively exploring and applying new information about teaching and learning over the past many decades, the physical designs of learning environments that house these new ideas have remained largely unchanged. What started as the great American one room schoolhouse in the nineteenth century evolved, largely due to industrial age thinking, into multiples of one room schoolhouses lined up on either side of a double-loaded corridor, producing a form which has become known as the "factory model" school. But though the newest version of the factory model school might incorporate movable walls to accommodate new ideas about team teaching or cooperative learning, or a new entryway with a striking architectural design feature, the basic structure of the American schoolhouse has not changed for more than a hundred years.

It is for this reason that planners and architects, working in close collaboration with educators, can look beyond the walls of the factory model schoolhouse and dare to create new models that promote more meaningful and effective lifelong learning for all citizens. Since we now know that significantly large numbers of students learn as much through visual, spatial, musical and other stimuli, then perhaps we should be building richly programmed learning environments that speak to these more poetic and integrated qualities of space and time. Rather than thinking of learning environments for the future as extensions of the past, perhaps a more multifaceted, integrated and community-based model is needed.

If we are to take Dr. Gardner and other prominent researchers seriously, as most educators do, then why can't we come up with more outdoor spaces for naturalistic learners and galleries or changing exhibits for visual and spatial types. And with all of the news about project based (kinesthetic) learning, how about moving the Career and Technical Education workshops out into the community where CTE and academic teachers can work together to deliver more lively and compelling programs for hands-on learners?

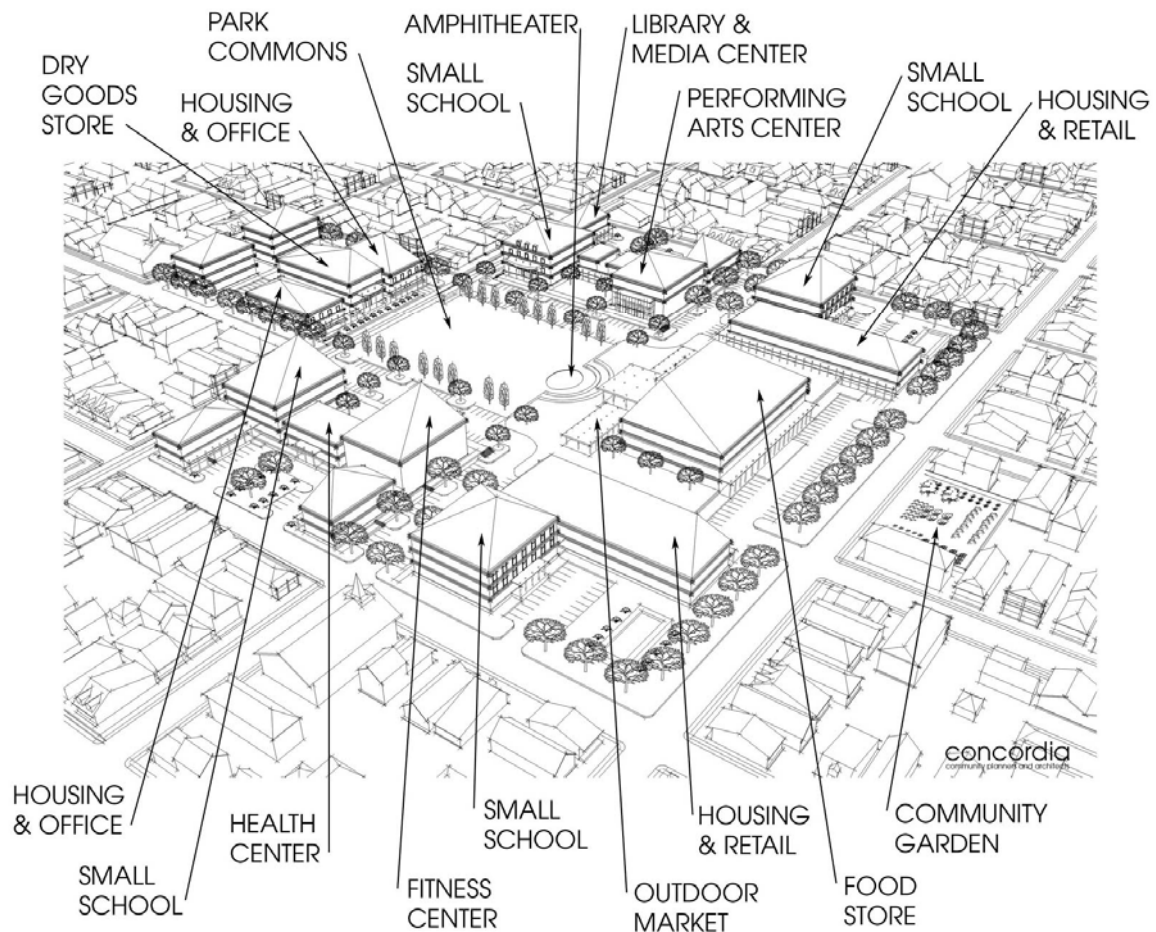
Imagine what it took to take the one room schoolhouse away from the cornfield and construct it miles away, and to invent and fund a new bus transportation system to transport children to school and home every day. But parents wanted the best for their children. They wanted them to be prepared for work in industry - especially in the then-lucrative world of manufacturing. Today

parents still want their children to be successful, but as Dan Pink points out in his new book [A Whole New Mind](#), the American entrepreneur of the future is likely to succeed more because of his or her own creativity than because of some manufacturing or management skills from the last century^{iv}.

Consequently, progressive educators are clamoring for planners and architects to come up with more integrated and compelling environments for teaching and learning. They are stretching their thinking in search of environments that are more welcoming, emotionally stimulating and friendly, “like a village”. It is for this reason that consideration should be given for the further development of the New Orleans Community Nexus Center concept as a national model for lifelong learning through a more integrated and systemic approach to planning and community engagement.

Prototype Community Nexus Center Design

Following is a visual illustration of how a Community Nexus Center might be organized for a hypothetical small town or neighborhood:



National Issues of Confidence and Trust

In the aftermath of Katrina and Rita, *Community Nexus Centers* can be an important tool for engaging the community in issues related to the full range of the physical, cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational aspects of neighborhood and community planning. But the need for a more collaborative approach to planning is also endemic to cities and neighborhoods across the nation. Acute lapses in public confidence exist in most urban communities. The results include things like high turnover rates of local political officials, school superintendents and their key administrative staff. In this environment it is often difficult for communities to maintain a common vision for the planning and implementation of integrated community services. A more democratic model that is authentically implemented at the scale of neighborhoods could help to foster more inclusion and stability. It is in this way that the *Community Nexus Center* initiative, if successfully implemented, could become a model for collaborative planning in neighborhoods and communities elsewhere.

END NOTES

ⁱ Coalition for Community Schools, Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books/Harper Collins, 1983; 1993).

ⁱⁱⁱ Gardner.

^{iv} Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2004).

APPENDIX

STATE AND LOCAL PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS SUPPORTING THE NEXUS CENTER CONCEPT

LOUISIANA RECOVERY AUTHORITY

On January 21, which was proclaimed Louisiana Recovery Planning Day by Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) and FEMA's Long Term Community Recovery team (LTCR) hosted a series of open houses to provide Louisianans with an opportunity to express their needs and to help define a community-based vision for the state's recovery. The purpose of the open houses was to gather specific ideas and preferences from Louisianans about how they felt their communities and state should be rebuilt. More than 3,000 citizens participated in 30 open houses held throughout Louisiana, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas.

Key findings indicate that Louisianans' first priority was for rebuilding better levees (19%). Equal to this priority at a combined total of 19% are preferences that support the **Community Nexus Center** concept, including improving schools (9%); providing better community/social services (7%); Supporting arts and culture (2%); and creating more parks (1%).

Other findings include preferences for Encouraging Development (11%); Restoring Coastal Areas (10%); Attracting New Businesses (9%); Creating Reconstruction Jobs (8%); Reducing Crime (5%); Making Highway/Street Improvements (5%); Protecting the Environment (4%); Devising a Workable Plan (4%); Providing a better Public Transportation System (3%); and Buying out Flood-Prone Properties (3%).

BRING NEW ORLEANS BACK COMMISSION

BNOB Education Sub-Committee

Following are excerpts from the "Bring New Orleans Back" Education Committee report referencing important concepts inherent in developing schools as community nexus centers:

• Under the Six Major Aspirations: (Recommendation 5): Schools that engage and empower their communities: (Schools as centers for community activities)

"Many people suggested that New Orleans should take advantage of this rebuilding to plan community centers in and around schools. School that offered activities, services, and gathering places for the community would help to bring the community together and also engage people more with their local schools."

• Under the Ten Major Principles: (Principle 10: Safe, Learner Centered Environments):

"All schools need to be safe, clean, well maintained, and designed to support the educational mission of the school. As facilities are developed or remodeled, there should be consideration for flexibility to serve the needs of both the school and the community".

• Under the Four Structural Cornerstones (Cornerstone 4: Engaged Parents and Community)

"Partnering with community groups will also be a critical feature of the Educational Network Model. When re-building schools and communities, the plan recommends that schools consider co-location with community facilities such as medical clinics; libraries and recreation centers; classes for adult education, workforce training and job counseling; early childhood programs; and community meeting centers. **These community-centered sites could ultimately serve as a nexus for the coordination of many community services at the neighborhood level.** The plan also calls for actively partnering with community groups that can offer services and programs that enrich student learning."

BNOB Cultural Sub-Committee

Objective 2: Support Community Based Cultural Traditions and Repair and Develop Cultural Facilities.

2.3 Support community-based cultural traditions and rebuild or develop community arts centers and cultural attractions in all neighborhoods.

"Every neighborhood of New Orleans has community-based cultural traditions that reflect the history and living spirit of the people who reside there. These traditions contribute importantly to neighborhood cohesion and character. **The artists, organizations and associations that keep these traditions alive need recognition and support. In our rebuilt City, every community ought to have ready access to places of worship, schools, parks and community arts centers – Nexus Centers – where children and adults can practice and preserve these neighborhood traditions and where artists of all kinds can contribute to the positive development of our diverse neighborhoods.** Every community ought to have a cultural attraction that reflects its distinctive history. Together, these neighborhood cultural attractions would significantly enhance people's understanding of New Orleans' rich cultural legacy overall. In some neighborhoods, existing structures can be adapted to serve as community arts centers or cultural attractions. In other places, new structures are needed. Supporting neighborhood-based cultural expressions is essential to the revitalization of our diverse communities and to the rebuilding of important neighborhood institutions such as houses of worship, parks and schools."

Recommendation # 7:

Develop neighborhood-based cultural traditions,
community arts centers and cultural attractions

"Investing in these concepts will recognize the vital important of sustaining New Orleans' diverse neighborhood-based, indigenous cultural traditions, restore positive activity in every neighborhood, provide employment for artists, give children places for constructive after-school and weekend activity, and offer studio and rehearsal spaces and other kinds of gathering and work spaces for neighborhood artists, second line companies, marching bands and other groups."

Objective 4: Teach Cultural Traditions to our Children

4.4: Partner schools with local arts organizations and businesses.

BNOB Urban Planning Sub-Committee

The Urban Planning Sub-Committee recommends what it calls a '**neighborhood center**'

planning model wherein neighborhoods are designated as the centers of activity and daily life. It maintains that neighborhoods require sufficient population to support the equitable and efficient provision of public facilities and services and that every neighborhood must have:

- Basic infrastructure: roads, drainage, utilities, services
- Public schools
- Cultural and community facilities
- Places of worship
- Health facilities
- Park and open space within an easy walk
- Convenience retail
- Access to public transit